

THRILLING

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WONDER

STORIES

JUNE 25¢



FEATURING

SON OF THE TREE

A novel of the far worlds

By **JACK VANCE**

TEMPORARY KEEPER

An adventure in space

By **H. B. FYFE**

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION





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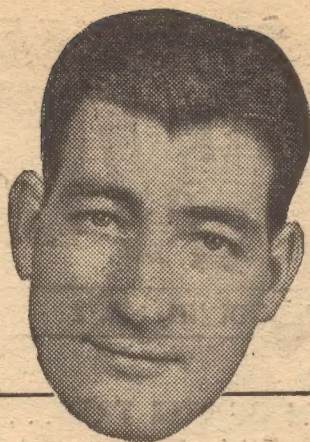
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THRILLING WONDER STORIES

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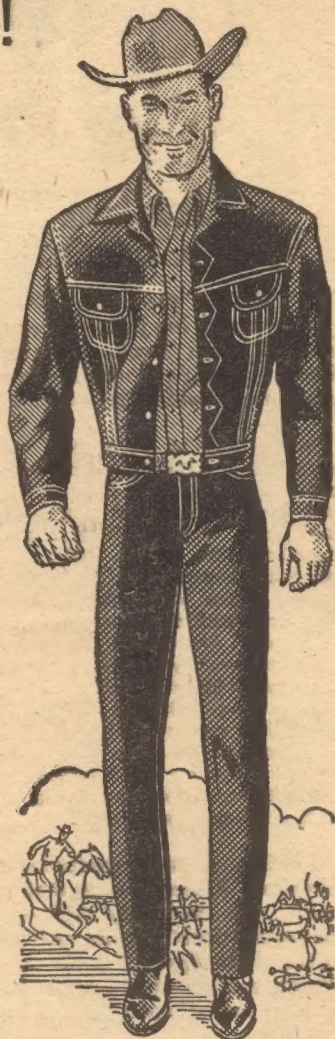
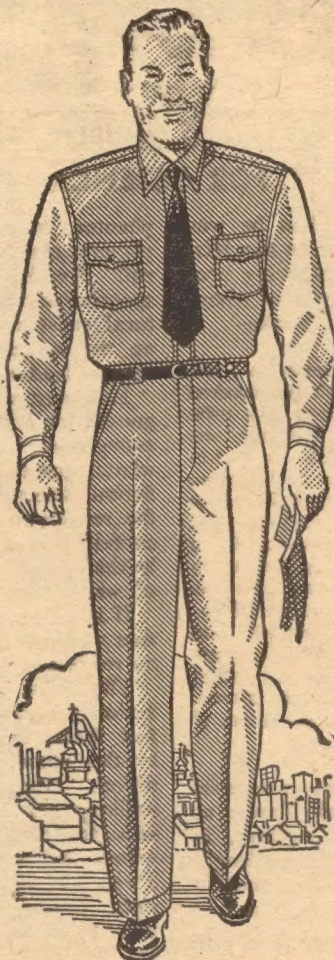
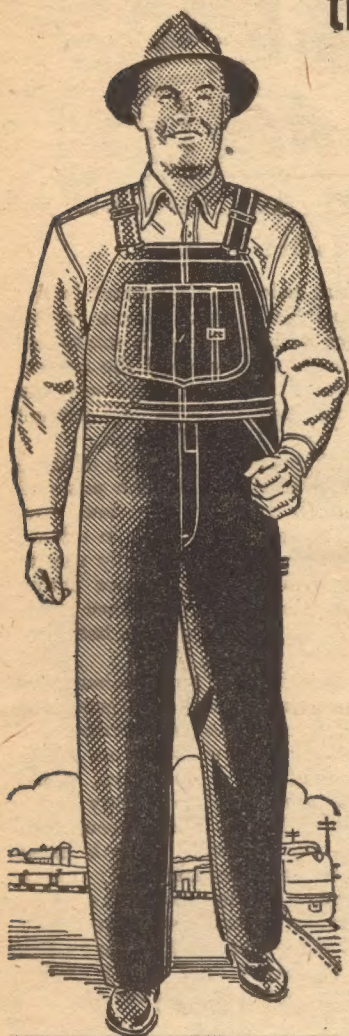
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SAM MERWIN, JR., Editor

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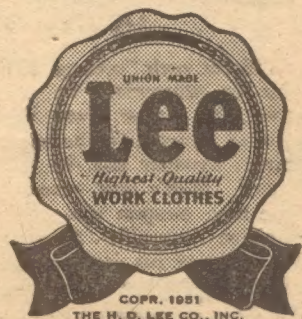
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BACK in the early 1880's, when he was writing his justly-famed *Life on the Mississippi*, Mark Twain made the following profound observation anent the mighty river whose existence provided the theme of his book—

In the space of one hundred and seventy-six years the Lower Mississippi has shortened itself two hundred and forty-three miles. That is an average of a trifle over one mile and a third per year. Therefore, any calm person, who is not blind or idiotic, can see that in the Old Oolitic Silurian Period, just a million years ago next November, the Lower Mississippi River was upward of one million three hundred thousand miles long, and stuck out over the Gulf of Mexico like a fishing-rod. And by the same token any person can see that seven hundred and forty-two years from now the Lower Mississippi will be only a mile and three-quarters long, and Cairo and New Orleans will have joined their streets together, and be plodding comfortably along under a single mayor and a mutual board of alderman. There is something fascinating about science. One gets such wholesome returns of conjecture out of such a trifling investment of fact.

Putting aside regretfully such masterful clowning, it seems to us that Mark Twain, as usual, was absolutely right—not, perhaps, in his speculations as to the past and future length of the Mississippi but in his conclusion concerning the vast scientific edifices that can, have and will be reared upon “a trifling investment of fact.”

Tight Girdle

Without such “returns of conjecture,” wholesome or otherwise, we would be minus the meson, the planet Pluto, the Einstein theories or, in all probability, the automobile, the vacuum cleaner, flypaper and the garbage disposal unit as well. Man's first successful use of stick or stone as a weapon was a triumphal proving of primitive scientific theorizing—as has been every step of his material progress since.

Certainly, if the cumulative effect of speculative thought applies to science, it applies also to science fiction—and you can double it in spades, hearts, diamonds, clubs or even the

phantom green suit beloved of contract bridge players caught helplessly in a vicious cross-ruff. For the very basis of fiction is unabashed speculation and when to it we add the conjectural constructions of science we are way out on the speculative limb with the ten-percent margin traders of pre-1929 Wall Street.

However, what happened to the bulk of these guesstwork millionaires after the crash was real enough—even if their fortunes were not. And what happens to the men and women in science fiction stories must always seem equally real to the reader—a fact which keeps science fiction contained in a corset of plausibility more rigidly than any Godey or Gibson girl in her ditto of whalebone.

If it were not for this tight girdle science fiction would be utterly mad—and there would be no readers and therefore no science fiction.

The great gulf separating sf from other fiction generates chiefly, it seems to us, in the fact that other fiction is limited pretty much by the boundaries of history and present conditions. Suppose, for instance (this is most unlikely but let us suppose anyway), that a straight-fiction author wished to write a story whose entire action were based on Mark Twain's assumption that, one million years ago next November, the Mississippi *was* 1,300,000 miles long and stuck out over the Gulf of Mexico like a fishing-rod.

Obviously he couldn't do it and sell his readers on the idea. So, perforce, he would have to abandon the entire project and sit around, chewing his typewriter, until another idea transformed itself through various tortuous processes into story form. This sitting around, while the sheriff is beating a path to his door, can be for the author mighty painful indeed.

Theories, Anybody?

With the science fiction author it is different. Instead of tossing his notes into fireplace or wastebasket he would sit around until he had dredged up a plausible theory that *would* hang

(Continued on page 133)

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FULL OR SPARE
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**NEW NYLON MESH FAST-SELLER...
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FROM THE FIRST
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**FREE SELLING
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THE SIGN OF VALUE!

Good Housekeeping Guarantee Seal on Velvet-ez Air-Cushioned Insole shoes shows your customers they can't lose a dime! Send Coupon Today!

**GREAT WOMEN'S LINE LIKE
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Scores of styles! Fast-Selling beauties in blue, green, red, tan, grey, brown, black and white bring you plenty of extra orders from housewives, waitresses, school girls, office girls, teen-agers — every home and office means you can sell to both men and women.

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BILL OUTSMARTED THE SPIES AND THEN...



THEN IT'S YOURS?



YES, AND IF YOU WILL BRING IT TO ME AT ONCE, THERE IS A LIBERAL REWARD!

BILL BAKER, YOUNG LAWYER, FOUND A BRIEF CASE COMING HOME ON THE MIDNIGHT COMMUTING TRAIN AND NOW IT LOOKS LIKE HE HAS LOCATED THE OWNER...



SO...YOU HAVE EXAMINED THE CONTENTS, EH?

THAT'S HOW I FOUND YOUR PHONE NUMBER.

COME WITH ME, PLEASE



HURRY UP! THERE'S NO TIME TO LOSE!

DON'T WORRY. HE'LL BE A LONG TIME GETTING OUT OF THIS!



WHEW! DID YOU GET THEM?

WE SURE DID... PAPERS AND ALL!

YOU'LL SEE YOUR "FRIENDS" DOWN AT THE BUREAU

AND THEN THE FEDERAL AGENTS ARRIVED...



I'LL BE READY FOR BAKER IN FIFTEEN MINUTES!

THAT'S THE CHIEF, HOW DO YOU FEEL?

TIRED AND DIRTY. ANY CHANCE OF FRESHENING UP HERE?



HERE, A CLEAN SHAVE WILL HELP

THANKS



I FEEL LIKE A NEW MAN! THAT WAS THE SLICKEST, MOST REFRESHING SHAVE I'VE EVER HAD!

THIN GILLETTES ARE PLENTY KEEN AND EASY SHAVING



SO WHEN I SAW "URANIUM" AND "SECRET" ON THE PAPERS, I CALLED YOUR OFFICE FIRST

...AND NETTED US TWO DANGEROUS SPIES

HE HAS LOOKS, COURAGE AND INTELLIGENCE. WE NEED MEN LIKE HIM

ENJOY FAST, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES AT A SAVING...USE THIN GILLETTES. FAR KEENER AND LONGER LASTING THAN ANY OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADES, THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY AND ELIMINATE THE RISK OF SCRAPES AND NICKS. BUY THIN GILLETTES IN THE NEW 10-BLADE PACKAGE WITH USED-BLADE COMPARTMENT

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SON of the TREE



A BRIGHT penetrating chime struck into two hundred minds, broke two hundred bubbles of trance.

Joe Smith awoke without drowsiness. He was constricted, shrouded like a cocoon. He tensed, he struggled, then the spasm of alarm died. He relaxed,

A Novel by JACK VANCE

*Visit the planets of Kyril and Ballenkarch on the trail of
an adventurer who sought Destiny on a far-distant star!*

peered intently through the darkness.

The air was musky and humid with warm flesh—flesh of many men, above, below, to right and left, twisting, straining, fighting the elastic mesh.

Joe lay back. His mind resumed a sequence of thought left off three weeks ago. Ballenkarch? No—not yet. Ballenkarch would be further on, further out in the fringes. This would be Kyril, the world of the Druids.

A thin ripping sound. The hammock split along a magnetic seam. Joe eased himself out onto the catwalk. His legs were limp as sausages and tender. There was little tone in his muscles after three weeks under hypnosis.

He walked the catwalk to the ladder, descended to the main deck, stepped out the port. At a desk sat a dark-skinned youth of sixteen, wide-eyed and smart, wearing a jumper of tan and blue pliophane. "Name, please?"

"Joe Smith."

The youth made a check on a list, nodded down the passage. "First door for sanitation."

Joe slid back the door, entered a small room thick with steam and anti-septic vapor. "Clothes off," bawled a

brassy-voiced woman in tight trunks. She was wolf-lean—her blue-brown skin streamed with perspiration. She yanked off the loose garment issued him by ship's stores—then, standing back, she touched a button. "Eyes shut."

JETS of cleansing solutions beat at his body. Various pressures, various temperatures, and his muscles began to waken. A blast of warm air dried him and the woman, with a careless slap, directed him to an adjoining chamber, where he shaved off his stubbly beard, trimmed his hair and finally donned the smock and sandals which appeared in a hopper.

As he left the room a steward halted him, placed a nozzle against his thigh, blew under his skin an assortment of vaccines, anti-toxins, muscle toners and stimulants. So fortified, Joe left the ship, walked out on a stage, down a ramp to the soil of Kyril.

He took a deep breath of fresh planetary air and looked about him. A sky overhung with a pearly overcast. A long gently-heaving landscape checked with tiny farms rolled away to the hori-

Author Sans Alias

WE WOULD like to use this space to cut the throat of a stubborn rumor that has, for almost a year now, been rife in uninformed science fiction circles—namely that Jack Vance is merely another pseudonym for Henry Kuttner.

Mr. Kuttner, long a TWS standby, has worked under many names for many magazines. A few of his noms de plume include Lewis Padgett, Keith Hammond, Lawrence O'Donnell, Hudson Hastings, Will Garth, Woodrow Wilson Smith, Kelvin Kent and, more recently, C. H. Liddell. But Jack Vance is not among them.

We have been reading Mr. Vance's work since he first began turning out fascinating but, alas, unpurchaseable pseudo-Cabell fantasies almost a decade ago. We had a hand in the purchase of what we believe to be his first published story, *THE WORLD THINKER*, which appeared in the Summer, 1945, edition of this magazine. We have long been in correspondence not only with him but, while he was in the Merchant Marine during the last war, with his mother. We have run his picture in one of our now-defunct Meet-the-Author departments. We feel thoroughly qualified to state that he is *not* Henry Kuttner—although we by no means hold this erroneous report to be a cause either for double murder or double suicide on the part of the authors involved.

In fact we think them both grand. And now, with this out of the way, you might try reading the accompanying story. We found it held quite a kick.

—THE EDITOR.

zon—and there, rising like a tremendous plume of smoke, stood the Tree. The outlines were hazed by distance and the upper foliage blended with the overcast but it was unmistakable. The Tree of Life.

He waited an hour while his passport and various papers of identification were checked and countersigned at a small glass-sided office under the embarkation stage. Then he was cleared and directed across the field to the terminal. This was a rococo structure of heavy white stone, ornately carved and beaded with intricate intaglios.

At the turnstile through the glass wall stood a Druid, idly watching the disembarkation. He was tall, nervously thin, with a pale fine ivory skin. His face was controlled, aristocratic—his hair jet-black, his eyes black and stern. He wore a glistening cuirass of enameled metal, a sumptuous robe falling in elaborate folds almost to the floor, edged with orphreys embroidered in gold thread. On his head sat an elaborate morion, built of cleverly fitted cusps and planes of various metals.

Joe surrendered his passage voucher to the clerk at the turnstile desk.

"Name please."

"It's on the voucher."

The clerk frowned, scribbled. "Business on Kyril?"

"Temporary visitor," said Joe shortly. He had discussed himself, his antecedents, his business, at length with the clerk in the disembarkation office. This new questioning seemed a needless annoyance. The Druid turned his head, looked him up and down. "Spies, nothing but spies!" He made a hissing sound under his breath, turned away.

Something in Joe's appearance aroused him. He turned back. "You there"—in a tone of petulant irritation.

Joe turned. "Yes?"

"Who's your sponsor? Whom do you serve?"

"No one. I'm here on my own business."

"Do not dissemble. Everyone spies.



ELFANE

—who travels space with Joe Smith on a mission of perilous interplanetary intrigue!

Why pretend otherwise? You arouse me to anger. Now—whom, then, do you serve?"

"The fact of the matter is that I am not a spy," said Joe, holding an even courtesy in his voice. Pride was the first luxury a vagrant must forego.

The Druid smiled with exaggerated thin-lipped cynicism. "Why else would you come to Kyril?"

"Personal reasons."

"You look to be a Thuban. What is your home world then?"

"Earth."

The Druid cocked his head, looked at him sidewise, started to speak, halted, narrowed his eyes, spoke again. "Do you mock me with the child's myth then—a fool's paradise?"

Joe shrugged. "You asked me a question. I answered you."

"With an insolent disregard for my dignity and rank."

A short plump man with a lemon-yellow skin approached with a strutting cocksure gait. He had wide innocent eyes, a pair of well-developed jowls and





he wore a loose cloak of heavy blue velvet.

"An Earthman *here*?" He looked at Joe. "You, sir?"

"That's right."

"Then Earth is an actuality."

"Certainly it is."

The yellow-skinned man turned to the Druid. "This is the second Earthman I've seen, Worship. Evidently—"

"Second?" asked Joe. "Who was the other?"

The yellow-skinned man rolled his eyes up. "I forget his name. Parry—Larry—Barry . . ."

"Harry? Harry Creath?"

"That's it—I'm sure of it. I had a few words with him out at Junction a

year or two ago. Very pleasant fellow."

The Druid swung on his heel, strode away. The plump man watched him go with an impassive face, then turned to Joe. "You seem to be a stranger here."

"I just arrived."

"Let me advise you as to these Druids. They are an emotional race, quick to anger, reckless, given to excess. And they are completely provincial, completely assured of Kyril's place as the center of all space, all time. It is wise to speak softly in their presence. May I inquire from curiosity why you are here?"

"I couldn't afford to buy passage farther."

"And so?"



The Son of the Tree now reminded Joe of a tremendous dandelion

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"And so?"

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Joe shrugged. "I'll go to work, raise some money."

The plump man frowned thoughtfully. "Just what talents or abilities will you use to this end?"

"I'm a good mechanic, machinist, dynamist, electrician. I can survey, work out stresses, do various odd jobs. Call myself an engineer."

HIS acquaintance seemed to be considering. At last he said doubtfully, "There is a plentiful supply of cheap labor among the Laity."

Joe swung a glance around the terminal. "From the look of that truss I'd say they were pretty shaky on the slide-rule."

The other pursed his lips in dubious agreement. "And of course the Druids are xenophobic to a high degree. A new face represents a spy."

Joe nodded, grinned. "I've noticed that. The first Druid I see raked me over the coals. Called me a Mang spy, whatever that is."

The plump man nodded. "It is what I am."

"A Mang—or a spy?"

"Both. There is small attempt at stealth. It is admitted. Every Mang on Kyril is a spy. Likewise with the Druids on Mangtse. The two worlds are striving for dominance, economic at the moment, and there is a great deal of rancor between us." He rubbed his chin further. "You want a position then, with remuneration?"

"Correct," said Joe. "But no spying. I'm not mixing in politics. That's out. Life's too short as it is."

The Mang made a reassuring gesture. "Of course. Now as I mentioned the Druids are an emotional race. Devious. Perhaps we can play on these qualities. Suppose you come with me to Divinal. I have an appointment with the District Thearch and if I boast to him about the efficient technician I have taken into my service . . ." He left the rest of the sentence floating, nodded owlily at Joe. "This way then."

Joe followed him through the terminal, along an arcade lined with shops to a parking area. Joe glanced down the line of air-cars. Antique design, he thought—slipshod construction.

The Mang motioned him into the largest of these cars. "To Divinal," he told the waiting driver.

The car arose, slanted up across the gray-green landscape. For all the apparent productivity of the land the country affected Joe unpleasantly. The villages were small, cramped and the streets and alleys glistened with stagnant water. In the fields he could see teams of men—six, ten, twenty—dragging cultivators. A dreary uninspiring landscape.

"Five billion peasants," said the Mang. "The Laity. Two million Druids. And one Tree."

Joe made a noncommittal sound. The Mang lapsed into silence. Farms below—interminable blocks, checks, rectangles, each a different tone of green, brown or gray. A myriad conical huts leaking smoke huddled in the corners of the fields. And ahead the Tree bulked taller, blacker, more massive.

Presently ornate white stone palaces appeared, huddled among the buttressed roots, and the car slanted down over the heavy roofs. Joe glimpsed a forest of looping balustrades, intricate panels, mullioned skylights, gargoyles, columns, embellished piers.

Then the car set down on a plat in front of a long high block of a structure, reminding Joe vaguely of the Palace at Versailles. To either side were carefully tended gardens, tessellated walks, fountains, statuary. And behind rose the Tree with its foliage hanging miles overhead.

The Mang alighted, turned to Joe. "If you'll remove the side panel to the generator space of this car and act as if you are making a minor repair I believe you will shortly be offered a lucrative post."

Joe said uncomfortably, "You're going to a great deal of effort for a stranger.

Are you a—philanthropist?"

The Mang said cheerfully, "Oh no. No, *nō*! I act as the whim moves me but I am not completely selfless in my acts. Let me express it this way—if I were sent to do an unspecified repair job I would take with me as wide a variety of tools as I was able.

"So, in my own—ah—mission I find that many persons have special talents or knowledges which turn out to be invaluable. Therefore I cultivate as wide and amicable an acquaintanceship as possible."

Joe smiled thinly. "Does it pay off?"

"Oh indeed. And then," said the plump man blandly, "courtesy is a reward in itself. There is an incalculable satisfaction in helpful conduct. Please don't consider yourself under obligation of any sort."

Jim thought, without expressing himself aloud, "I won't."

The plump man departed, crossed the plat to a great door of carved bronze.

Joe hesitated a moment. Then, perceiving nothing to be lost by following instructions, he unclamped the side panel. A band of lead held it in place like a seal. Joe hesitated another instant, then snapped the band, lifted the panel off.

He now looked into a most amazing mechanism. It had been patched together out of spare parts, bolted with lag screws into wooden blocks, bound to the frame with bits of rope. Wires lay exposed without insulation. The force-field adjustment had been made with a wooden wedge. Joe shook his head, marveling. Then recollecting the flight from the terminal, he sweated in retrospect.

The plump yellow-skinned man had instructed him to act as if he were repairing the motor. Joe saw that pretense would be unnecessary. The power-box was linked to the metadyne by a helter-skelter tubing. Joe reached in, pulled the mess loose, re-oriented the poles, connected the units with a short straight link.

A CROSS the plat another car landed and a girl of eighteen or nineteen jumped out. Joe caught the flash of eyes in a narrow vital face as she looked toward him. Then she had left the plat.

Joe stood looking after the sapling-slender form. He relaxed, turned back to the motor. Very nice—girls were nice things. He compressed his lips, thinking of Margaret. An entirely different kind of girl was Margaret. Blond in the first place—easy-going, flexible, but inwardly—Joe paused in his work. What was she, in her heart of hearts, where he had never penetrated?

When he had told her of his plans she had laughed, told him he was born thousands of years too late. Two years now—was Margaret still waiting? Three months was all he had thought to be gone—and then he had been led on and on, from planet to planet, out of Earth space, out across the Unicorn Gulf, out along a thin swirl of stars, beating his way from world to world.

On Jamivetta he had farmed moss on a bleak tundra and even the third-class passage to Kyril had looked good. *Margaret*, thought Joe, *I hope you're worth all this travail*. He looked at where the dark-haired Druid girl had run into the palace.

A harsh voice said, "What's this you're doing—tearing apart the air-car? You'll be killed for such an act."

It was the driver of the car the girl had landed in. He was a coarse-faced thick-bodied man with a swinish nose and jaw. Joe, from long and bitter experience on the outer worlds, held his tongue, turned back to investigate the machine further. He leaned forward in disbelief. Three condensers, hooked together in series, dangled and swung on their connectors. He reached in, yanked off the extraneous pair, wedged the remaining condenser into a notch, hooked it up again.

"Here, here, *here*!" bellowed the driver. "You be leaving your destruc-

tive hands off a delicate bit of mechanism!"

It was too much. Joe raised his head. "Delicate bit of machinery! It's a wonder this pitiful tangle of junk can fly at all."

The driver's face twisted in fury. He took a quick heavy step forward, then halted as a Druid came sweeping out on the plat—a big man with a flat red face and impressive eyebrows. He had a small hawk's-beak of a nose protruding like an afterthought between his cheeks, a mouth bracketed by ridges of stubborn muscle.

He wore a long vermilion robe with a cowl of rich black fur, an edging of fur along the robe to match. Over the cowl he wore a morion of black and green metal with a sunburst in red-and-yellow enamel cocked over one temple.

"Borandino!"

The driver cringed. "Worship."

"Go. Put away the Kelt."

"Yes, Worship."

The Druid halted before Joe. He saw the pile of discarded junk, his face became congested. "What are you doing to my finest car?"

"Removing a few encumbrances."

"The best mechanic on Kyril services that machinery!"

Joe shrugged. "He's got a lot to learn. I'll put that stuff back if you want me to. It's not my car."

The Druid stared fixedly at him. "Do you mean to say that the car will run after you've pulled all that metal out of it?"

"It should run better."

The Druid looked Joe over from head to foot. Joe decided that this must be the District Thearch. The Druid, with the faintest suggestion of furtiveness in his manner, looked back over his shoulder toward the palace, then back to Joe.

"I understand you're in the service of Hableyat."

"The Mang? Why—yes."

"You're not a Mang. What are you?"

Joe recalled the incident with the Druid at the terminal "I'm a Thuban."

"Ah! How much does Hableyat pay you?"

Joe wished he knew something of the local currency and its value. "Quite a bit," he said.

"Thirty stiples a week? Forty?"

"Fifty," said Joe.

"I'll pay you eighty," said the Thearch. "You'll be my chief mechanic."

Joe nodded. "Very well."

"You'll come with me right now. I'll inform Hableyat of the change. You'll have no further contact with that Mang assassin. You are now a servant to the Thearch of the District."

Joe said, "At your service, Worship."

II

THE BUZZER sounded. Joe flicked down the key, said "Garage."

A girl's voice issued from the plate, the peremptory self-willed voice of Priestess Elfane, the Thearch's third daughter, ringing now with an overtone-Joe could not identify.

"Driver, listen very closely. Do exactly as I bid."

"Yes, Worship."

"Take out the black Kelt, rise to the third level, then drop back to my apartment. Be discreet and you'll profit. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Worship," said Joe in a leaden voice.

"Hurry."

Joe pulled on his livery. Haste—discretion—stealth? A lover for Elfane? She was young but not too young. He had already performed somewhat similar errands for her sisters, Esane and Phedran. Joe shrugged. He could hope to profit. A hundred stiples, perhaps more.

He grinned ruefully as he backed the black Kelt from under the canopy. A tip from a girl of eighteen—and glad to get it. Sometime, somewhere—when

he returned to Earth and Margaret—he'd dust off his pretensions to pride and dignity. They were useless to him now, a handicap.

Money was money. Money had brought him across the galaxy and Ballenkarch was at last at hand. At night when the temple searchlights left the sky he could see the sun Ballen, a bright star in the constellation the Druids called the "Porphyrite". The cheapest passage, hypnotized and shipped like a corpse, cost two thousand stiples.

From a salary of eighty stiples a week he was able to save seventy-five. Three weeks had passed—twenty-four more would buy him passage to Ballankarch. Too long, with Margaret, blond, gay, lovely, waiting on Earth. Money was money. Tips would be accepted with thanks.

Joe took the car up the palace free-rise, wafting up alongside the Tree, up toward the third level. The Tree hung over him as if he had never left the ground and Joe felt the awe and wonder which three weeks in the very shadow of the trunk had done nothing to diminish.

A vast breathing sappy mass, a trunk five miles in diameter, twelve miles from the great kneed roots to the ultimate bud—the "Vital Exprescience" in the cant of the Druids. The foliage spread out and fell away on limber boughs, each as thick through as the Thearch's palace, hung like the thatch on an old-fashioned hayrick.

The leaves were roughly triangular,

three feet long—bright yellow in the upper air, darkening through lime, green, rose, scarlet, blue-black, toward the ground. The Tree ruled the horizons, shouldered aside the clouds, wore thunder and lightning like a wreath of tinsel. It was the soul of life, raw life, trampling and vanquishing the inert, and Joe understood well how it had come to be worshipped by the first marveling settlers on Kyril.

The third level. Down again, down in the black Kelt to the plat beside Priestess Elfane's apartments. Joe landed the car, jumped out, stepped across the gold-and-ivory inlay. Elfane herself slid aside the door—a vivid creature with a rather narrow face, dark, vital as a bird. She wore a simple gown of sheer white cloth without ornament and she was barefoot. Joe, who had seen her only in her official vestments, blinked, looked again with interest.

She motioned. "This way. Hurry." She held back the panel and Joe entered a tall chamber, elegant but of little warmth. Bands of white marble and dark blue dumortierite surfaced two walls, bands inset with copper palettes carved with exotic birds. The third wall was hung with a tapestry depicting a group of young girls running down a grassy slope and along this wall ran a low cushioned settee.

Here sat a young man in the vesture of a Sub-Thearch—a blue robe embroidered with the red and gray orphreys of his rank. A morion inlaid with gold

[Turn page]

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leaf-patterns lay beside him on the settee and a baton lathed from the Sacred Wood—an honor given only to those of Ecclesiarch degree—hung at his belt. He had lean flanks, wide spare shoulders and the most striking face of Joe's experience.

IT WAS a narrow passionate face, wide across high cheekbones, with flat cheeks slanting down to a prow of a chin. The nose was long and straight, the forehead broad. The eyes were flat black disks in narrow expressionless sockets, the brows ink-black, the hair an ink-black mop of ringlets, artfully disarranged. It was a clever, cruel face, full of fascination, overrich, overripe, without humor or sympathy—the face of a feral animal only coincidentally human.

Joe paused in mid-stride, stared into this face with instant aversion, then looked down to the corpse at the Ecclesiarch's feet—a sprawled grotesquely-rigid form oozing bright yellow blood into a crimson cloak.

Elfane said to Joe, "This is the body of a Mangtse ambassador. A spy but nevertheless an ambassador of high rank. Someone either killed him here or brought his body here. It must not be discovered. There must be no outcry. I trust you for a loyal servant. Some very delicate negotiations with the Mang Rule are underway. An incident like this might bring disaster. Do you follow me?"

Palace intrigue was none of Joe's affair. He said, "Any orders you may give, Worship, I will follow, subject to the permission of the Thearch."

She said impatiently, "The Thearch is too busy to be consulted. Ecclesiarch Manaolo will assist you in conveying the corpse into the Kelt. Then you will drive us out over the ocean and we'll dispose of it."

Joe said woodenly, "I'll bring the car as close as possible."

Manaolo rose to his feet, followed him to the door. Joe heard him mutter

over his shoulder, "We'll be crowded in that little cabin."

Elfane answered impatiently, "It's the only one I can drive."

Joe took his time arranging the car against the door, frowning in deep thought. The only car she could drive... He looked across fifty feet of space to the next plat along the side of the palace. A short man in a blue cloak, with hands clasped behind his back stood watching Joe benignly.

Joe re-entered the room. "There's a Mang on the next balcony."

"Hableyat!" exclaimed Manaolo. He strode to the door, looked out without disclosing himself. "He above all must not discover!"

"Hableyat knows everything," said Elfane gloomily. "Sometimes I think he has mastered second-sight."

Joe knelt beside the corpse. The mouth hung open, showing a rusty orange tongue. A well-filled pouch hung at his side, half-concealed by the cloak. Joe opened it. From behind came an angry word. Elfane said, "No, let him satisfy himself."

Her tone, her contemptuous condescension, stung Joe. But money was money. Ears burning, he reached into the pouch, pulled out a sheaf of currency. Hundred-stipule notes, a dozen at least. He returned to the pouch and found a small hand-weapon of a make he did not recognize. He tucked it into his blouse. Then he wrapped the corpse in the scarlet robe and, rising, caught hold under the armpits.

Manaolo took the ankles. Elfane went to the door. "He's gone. Hurry!"

Five seconds saw the corpse stowed in the back. Elfane said to Joe, "Come with me."

Wary of turning his back on Manaolo, Joe followed. She led him into a dressing room, pointed to a pair of cases. "Take them, load them in the back of the the Kelt."

Luggage, thought Joe. He obeyed. From the corner of his eye he saw that Hableyat had once more come out on

the balcony and was smiling blandly in his direction. Joe returned inside.

Elfane was wearing sandals and a dark blue robe like a girl of the Laity. It accentuated her sprite-like appearance, the tang, the spice, which seemed an essential part of her. Joe wrenched his eyes away. Margaret would not have dealt so casually with a corpse.

He said, "The Kelt is ready to go, Worship."

"You will drive," said Elfane. "Our route will be up to the fifth level, south over Divinal, across the bay and out to sea."

Joe shook his head. "I'm not driving. In fact I'm not going."

THE SENSE of his words failed to penetrate at once. Then Elfane and Manaolo together turned their heads. Elfane was surprised with a lack of comprehension on her face rather than anger. Manaolo stood expressionless, his eyes dull, opaque.

Elfane said in a sharper voice, as if Joe had not understood her, "Go on out—you will drive."

Joe casually slid his hand inside his blouse, where the little weapon rested. Manaolo's eyes flickered, the only movement of his face, but Joe knew his mind was agile and reckless.

"I don't intend driving you," said Joe. "You can easily ditch that corpse without me. I don't know where you're going or why. I know I'm not going with you."

"I order you!" exclaimed Elfane. This was fantastic, insane—contrary to the axioms of her existence.

Joe shook his head, watching warily. "Sorry."

Elfane dismissed the paradox from her mind. She turned to Manaolo. "Kill him here then. His corpse, at least, will provoke no speculation."

Manaolo grinned regretfully. "I'm afraid the clobberclaw is aiming a gun at us. He will refuse to let me kill him."

Elfane tightened her lips. "This is ridiculous." She whirled. Joe brought

out the gun. Elfane halted stock-still, words failing in her mouth.

"Very well," she said in a subdued voice. "I'll give you money to be silent. Will that satisfy you?"

"Very much," said Joe, smiling crookedly. Pride? What was pride? If it weren't for Margaret he'd enjoy. . . But no, she was plainly running off with this brilliant and dangerous Manaolo. Who would want a woman after his handling of her?

"How much?" asked Manaolo idly.

Joe calculated rapidly. He had four hundred stiples in his room, about a thousand he had taken from the corpse. He dismissed his calculations. Make it big. "Five thousand stiples and I've forgotten everything I've seen today."

The figure apparently did not seem exorbitant to either of them. Manaolo felt in one pocket, then another, found a money-flap, riffled out a number of notes, tossed them to the floor.

"There's your money."

Without a backward glance Elfane ran out on the plat, jumped into the Kelt. Manaolo strolled after her.

The Kelt jerked up, swung off into the clean air of Kyril. Joe was alone in the tall chamber.

He picked up the notes. Five thousand stiples! He went to the window, watched the air-car dwindle to a dot.

There was a small throb in his throat, a pang. Elfane was a wonderful creature. On Earth, had it not been for Margaret, he would have been entranced. But this was Kyril, where Earth was a fable. And Margaret, supple, soft, blond as a field full of jonquils, was waiting for him to return. Or at least knew that *he* was expecting her to wait. With Margaret, Jim thought ruefully, the idea might not mean the same thing. Damn Harry Creath!

He became uneasily aware of his surroundings. Any one of a dozen persons might enter and find him. There would be difficulty explaining his presence. Somehow he had to return to his own quarters. He froze in his tracks. The

sound of a door sliding brought an instant quickening of the pulse, a flush of sweat. He backed against the tapestry. Steps, slow, unhurried, came down the passageway.

The door scraped back. A man entered the room—a short yellow-skinned man in a blue velvet cloak—Hableyat.

III

HABLEYAT glanced briefly around the room, shook his head dolefully. "A bad business. Risky for all concerned."

Joe, standing stiffly at the wall, found ready assent. Hableyat took a couple steps forward, peered at the floor. "Careless. Still much blood."

He looked up, became conscious of Joe's stance. "But by all means be at your ease. Indeed be at your ease." For a moment he inspected Joe impersonally. "No doubt your mouth has been crammed with money. A marvel you still live."

Joe said dryly, "I was summoned here by the Priestess Elfane, who drove off in the Kelt. Otherwise I disassociate myself from the entire affair."

Hableyat shook his head wistfully. "If you are found here with the blood on the floor you will be questioned. And since every effort will be made to hush up Empoing's assassination you will undoubtedly be killed to ensure your silence."

Joe licked his lips. "But isn't it you for whom they want to hide the killing?"

Hableyat nodded. "No doubt. I represent the Power and Reach of the Mangtse Dail—that is, the Bluewater Faction. Empoing was born to the Red-streams, who follow a different school of thought. They believe in a swift succession of events."

A strange idea formed in Joe's mind and would not be dismissed. Hableyat noticed the shift of his features. His mouth, a short fleshy crevice between the two yellow jowls, drew in at the corners.

"Yes indeed. I killed him. It was necessary, believe me. Otherwise he would have slaughtered Manaolo, who is engaged on a very important mission. If Manaolo were deterred it would be—from one viewpoint—a tragedy."

The ideas were coming too fast—they fled by Joe's mind like a school of fish past a dip-net. It was as if Hableyat were displaying a tray full of bright wares, waiting to see which Joe would select.

Joe said warily, "Why are you telling me all this?"

Hableyat shrugged his meaty shoulders. "Whoever you are you are no simple chauffeur."

"Ah—but *I am!*"

"Who or what you are has not yet been established. These are complex times, when many people and many worlds want irreconcilable things and every man's origin and intentions must be closely analyzed. My information traces you to Thuban Nine, where you served as an instructor of civil engineering at the Technical Institute. From Thuban you came to Ardemizian, then to Panapol, then to Rosalinda, then to Jamivetta, finally to Kyril.

"On each planet you remained only long enough to earn transportation to the next. There is a pattern here and where there is a pattern there is a plan. Where there is a plan there is an intent and where there is an intent there are ends to be gained. And when ends are gained someone is the loser. But I see you are uneasy. Evidently you fear discovery. Am I right?"

"I do not care to be killed."

"I suggest that we repair to my apartment, which is nearby, and then perhaps we will have a chat. I am always eager to learn and possibly in gratitude for a safe exit from this apartment—"

A chime cut him short. He started, moved rapidly to the window, looked up, down. From the window he ran to the door, listened. He motioned to Joe. "Stand aside."

The chime sounded again—a heavy

knuckle rapped at the door. Hableyat hissed under his breath. A scratch, a scrape. The door slid aside.

A tall man with a wide red face and a little beak of a nose strode into the room. He wore a flowing white robe with a cowl and a black-green-and-gold morion atop the cowl. Hableyat slid behind him, executed a complex gesture involving a kick at the back of the man's legs, a clip of the forearm, a wrench at the wrist—and the Druid fell face down on the floor.

Joe gasped, "It's the Thearch himself! We'll be flayed..."

"Come," said Hableyat, once more a benevolent man of business. They stepped swiftly down the hall. Hableyat slid back his door. "In."

Hableyat's suite was larger than the chambers of the Priestess Elfane. The sitting room was dominated by a long rectangular table, the top cut from a single slab of polished dark wood inlaid with arabesque copper leaves.

Two Mang warriors sat stiffly in each side of the door—short stocky men, craggy of feature, lemon-yellow of skin—sitting as if neither had moved in hours. Hableyat paid them no heed, passed them as if they were inanimate. Noting Joe's inquiring glance, he appeared to observe them for the first time.

"Hypnotized," he said off-handedly. "So long as I'm in the room or the room is empty they won't move."

JOE gingerly moved past him into the room, reflecting that he was as open to suspicion here as he was in the Priestess' apartment.

Hableyat seated himself with a grunt, motioned Joe to a chair. Rather than trust himself to a maze of unknown corridors Joe obeyed. Hableyat lay his plump palms flat on the table, fixed Joe with candid eyes.

"You appear to be caught up in an unpleasant situation, Joe Smith."

"Not necessarily," said Joe with a forlorn attempt at spirit. "I could go to the Thearch, tell my story and that would be

an end to it."

Hableyat's face quivered as he chortled, opening his mouth like a squirrel. "And then?"

Joe said nothing.

Hableyat slapped the table heartily. "My boy, you are not yet familiar with the Druid psychology. To them killing is the response to almost any circumstance—a casual act like turning out the light on leaving a room. So when you had told your story you would be killed. For no particular reason other than that it is easier to kill than not to kill." Hableyat idly traced the pattern of a tendril with his yellow fingernail, spoke as if musing aloud.

"Sometimes the strangest organisms are the most efficient. Kyril operates in a manner remarkable for its utter simplicity. Five billion lives devoted to feeding and pampering two million Druids and one Tree. But the system works, it perpetuates itself—which is the test for viability.

"Kyril is a grotesque ultimate of religious dedication. Laity, Druids, Tree. Laity works, Druids conduct the rites, Tree is—is immanent. Amazing! Humanity creates from the same protoplasm the clods of the Laity, the highly-tempered Druids."

Joe stirred restlessly. "What is all this to me?"

"I merely indicate," said Hableyat gently, "that your life is not worth the moist spot where I spit to anyone but yourself. What is life to a Druid? See this workmanship? The lives of ten men have been spent on this table. The slabs of marble on the wall—they were ground to fit by hand. Cost? Druids have no awareness of the concept. Labor is free, manpower unlimited.

"Even the electricity which powers and lights the palace is generated by hand in the cellars—in the name of the Tree of Life, where the poor blind souls ultimately hope to reside, serene in the sunlight and wind. The Druids thereby justify the system to their consciences, to the other worlds.

"The Laity knows nothing better. An ounce of meal, a fish, a pot of greens—so they survive. They know no marriage rites, no family, no tradition, not even folk-lore. They are cattle on a range. They breed with neither passion nor grace.

"Controversies? The Druid formula is simple. Kill both parties and so the controversy is dead. Unassailable—and the Tree of Life looms across the planet, the mightiest promise of life eternal the galaxy has ever known. Pure massive vitality!"

Joe hitched himself forward in his seat, looked to his right at the immobile Mang warriors. To his left, across the deep orange rug, out the window. Hableyat followed his gaze with a quizzical purse to his lips.

Joe said in a tight voice, "Why are you keeping me here? What are you waiting for?"

Hableyat blinked rapidly, reproachfully. "I am conscious of no intent to detain you. You are free to leave any time you wish."

"Why bring me here in the first place?" demanded Joe.

Hableyat shrugged. "Sheer altruism possibly. If you returned to your quarters now you are as good as dead. Especially after the regrettable intrusion of the Thearch."

Joe relaxed into the chair. "That's not—necessarily true."

Hableyat nodded vigorously. "I'm afraid it is. Consider—it is known or will be known, that you took up the black Kelt, which subsequently was driven away by Priestess Elfane and Ecclesiarch Manaolo. The Thearch, coming to his daughter's apartments, perhaps to investigate, perhaps in response to a summons, is attacked. Shortly afterwards the chauffeur returns to his quarters." He paused, opened plump hands out significantly.

Joe said, "All right then. What's on your mind?"

Hableyat tapped the table with his fingernail. "These are complex times,

complex times. You see," he added confidentially, "Kyril is becoming overpopulated with Druids."

Joe frowned. "Overpopulated? With two million Druids?"

HABLEYAT laughed. "Five billion Laity are unable to provide a dignified existence for more. You must understand that these poor wretches have no interest in producing. Their single aspiration is to pass through life as expeditiously as possible so as to take their place as a leaf on the Tree.

"The Druids are caught in a dilemma. To increase production they must either educate and industrialize—thus admitting to the Laity that life offers pleasures other than rapt contemplation—or they must find other sources of wealth and production. To this end the Druids have decided to operate a bank of industries on Ballenkarch. So we Mangs and our highly industrialized world become involved. We see in the Druid plan a threat to our own well-being."

Joe asked with an air of tired patience, "How does this involve me?"

"My job as emissary-at-large," said Hableyat, "is to promote the interests of my world. To this end I require a great deal of information. When you arrived here a month ago you were investigated. You were traced back as far as a planet of the distant sun Thuban. Before that, your trail eludes us."

Joe said with incredulous anger, "But you *know* my home world! I told you the first time I saw you. Earth. And you said that you had spoken to another Earthman, Harry Creath."

Hableyat nodded briskly. "Exactly. But it has occurred to me that 'Earth' as a place of origin offers a handy anonymity." He peered at Joe slyly. "Both for you and Harry Creath."

Joe took a deep breath. "You know more of Harry Creath than you let me believe."

Hableyat appeared surprised that Joe should consider this fact exceptional.

"Of course. It is necessary for me to know many things. Now this 'Earth' you speak of—is its identity actually more than verbal?" And he eyed Joe inquisitively.

"I assure you it is," said Joe, heavily sarcastic. "You people are so far out along this little wisp of stars that you've forgotten the rest of the universe."

Hableyat nodded, drummed his fingers on the table. "Interesting, interesting. This brings a rather new emphasis to light."

Joe said impatiently, "I'm not aware of any emphasis, either old or new. My business, such as it is, is personal. I have no interest in your enterprises and least of all do I want to become involved."

There was a harsh pounding at the door. Hableyat rose to his feet with a grunt of satisfaction. This was what he had been waiting, Joe thought.

"I repeat," said Hableyat, "that you have no choice. You are involved in spite of any wish to the contrary. Do you want to live?"

"Of course I want to live." Joe half-rose to his feet as the pounding was resumed.

"Then agree to whatever I say—no matter how far-fetched it may seem to you. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Joe with resignation.

Hableyat spoke a sharp word. The two warriors bounded to their feet like mechanical men, "Open the door."

The door slid back. Thearch stood in the opening, his face wrathful. Behind him stood a half dozen Druids in robes of different colors—Ecclesiarchs, Sub-Thearchs, Presbytes, Hierophants.

Hableyat was transformed. His overt characteristics became intensified. His benignity softened to obsequiousness; his bland ease of manner become a polished unction. He trotted forward as if the Thearch's visit afforded him tremendous pride and delight.

The Thearch towered in the doorway, glaring up and down the room. His eyes passed over the two warriors, came to rest on Joe.

He raised a hand, pointed portentously. "There's the man! A murderous blackguard! Lay hold, we'll see the end of him before the hour's out."

The Druids swept forward in a swift rustle of robes. Joe reached for his weapon. But the two Mang warriors, moving so deftly and easily that they seemed not to have moved at all, blocked the doorway. A hot-eyed Druid in a brown-and-green robe reached to thrust them aside.

There was a twinkle of blue light, a crackle, a startled exclamation and the Druid leapt back, trembling in indignation. "He's charged with static!"

Hableyat hustled forward, all dismay and alarm. "Your Worship, what is happening?"

The Thearch's expression was vastly contemptuous. "Stand aside, Mang, call off your electrified go-devils. I'll have that man."

CRIED Hableyat, "But Worship, Worship—you dismay me. Can it be that I've taken a criminal into my service?"

"Your service?"

"Surely your Worship is aware that in order to pursue a realistic policy my government employs a number of unofficial observers?"

"Cutthroat spies!" roared the Thearch.

Hableyat rubbed his chin. "If such is the case, your Worship, I am disillusioned, since the Druid spies on Mangtse are uniformly self-effacing. Just what is my servant accused of?"

The Thearch thrust his head forward, said with soft fervor, "I'll tell you what he's done—he's killed one of your own men—a Mang! There's yellow blood all over the floor of my daughter's chamber. Where there's blood, there's death."

"Your Worship!" exclaimed Hableyat. "This is serious news! Who is it that is dead?"

"How do I know? Enough that there's a man killed and that this—"

"But your Worship! This man has

been in my company all day. Your news is alarming. It means that a representative of my government has been attacked. I fear that there will be tumult in the Lathbon. Where did you notice this blood? In the chamber of your daughter, the Priestess? Where is she? Perhaps she can shed some light on the matter."

"I don't know where she is." He turned, pointed a finger. "Alamaina—find the Priestess Elfane. I wish to speak to her." Then to Hableyat, "Do I understand that you are taking this blackguard spy under your protection?"

Hableyat said courteously, "Our security officers have been solicitous in guarding the safety of the Druids representing your Worship on Mangtse."

The Thearch turned on his heel, strode off through the hooded forms of his Druids.

Joe said, "So now I'm a Mang spy."

"What would you have?" inquired Hableyat.

Joe returned to his seat. "For some reason I can't imagine you are determined to attach me to your staff."

Hableyat made a gesture of deprecation.

Joe stared at him a moment. "You murder your own men, you strike down the Thearch in his daughter's sitting-room—and somehow I find myself held to account for it. It's not possible that you planned it that way?"

"Now, now, now," murmured Hableyat.

Joe asked politely, "May I presume upon your courtesy further?"

"Certainly. By all means." Hableyat waited attentively.

Joe said boldly, without any real expectation of Hableyat's assent, "Take me to the Terminal. Put me on the packet to Ballenkarch which leaves today."

Hableyat, raising his eyebrows sagely, nodded. "A very reasonable request—and one which I would be unkind to deny. Are you ready to leave at once?"

"Yes," said Joe dryly, "I am."

"And you have sufficient funds?"

"I have five thousand stiples given me by the Priestess Elfane and Manaolo."

"Hah! I see. They were anxious then to be on their way?"

"I received that impression."

Hableyat looked up sharply. "There is suppressed emotion in your voice."

"The Druid Manaolo arouses a great deal of aversion in me."

"Hah!" said Hableyat with a sly wink.

"And the Priestess arouses a great deal of the opposite? Oh, you youngsters! If only I had my youth back how I would enjoy myself!"

Joe said in precise tones, "My future plans involve neither Manaolo nor Elfane."

"Only the future can tell," intoned Hableyat. "Now then—to the Terminal."

IV

THERE was no signal which Joe could perceive but in three minutes, during which Hableyat sat silently hunched in a chair, a heavy well-appointed air-car swung alongside the plat. Joe went cautiously to the window, looked along the side of the palace. The sun was low. Shadows from the various balconies, landing stages, carved work, ran obliquely along the stone, creating a confusion of shape in which almost anything might be hidden.

Below were the garage and his cubicle. Nothing there of value—the few hundred stiples he had saved from his salary as chauffeur he dismissed. Beyond rose the Tree, a monstrous mass his eye could not encompass at one glance. To see edge to edge he had to turn his head from right to left. The shape was uncertain from this close distance of a mile or so. A number of slow-swinging members laden with foliage overhung the Palace.

Hableyat joined him at the window. "It grows and grows. Some day it will grow beyond its strength or the strength of the ground. It will buckle and fall

in the most terrible sound yet heard on the planet. And the crash will be the crack of doom for the Druids."

He glanced carefully up and down the face of the Palace. "Now walk swiftly. Once you are in the car you are safe from any hidden marksmen."

Again Joe searched the shadows. Then gingerly he stepped out on the plat. It seemed very wide, very empty. He crossed to the car with a naked tingling under his skin. He stepped through the door and the car swayed under him. Hableyat bounced in beside him.

"Very well, Juliam," said Hableyat to the driver, a very old Mang, sad-eyed, wrinkled of face, his hair gone, brindle-brown with age "We'll be off—to the Terminal. Stage Four, I believe. The *Belsaurion* for Junction and Ballenkarch."

Juliam trod on the elevator pedal. The car swung up and away. The Palace dwindled below and they rose be-

side the dun trunk of the Tree, up under the first umbrella of fronds.

The air of Kyril was usually filled with a smoky haze but today the slanting sun shone crisply through a perfectly clear atmosphere. The city Divinal, such as it was—a heterogeneity of palaces, administrative offices, temples, a few low warehouses—huddled among the roots of the Tree and quickly gave way to a gently rolling plain thronged with farms and villages.

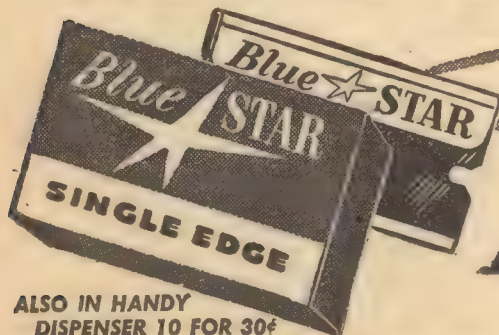
Roads converged in all directions toward the Tree and along these roads walked the drab men and women of the Laity—making their pilgrimage to the Tree. Joe had watched them once or twice as they entered the Ordinal Cleft, a gap between two great arched roots. Tiny figures like ants, they paused, turned to stare out across the gray land before continuing on into the Tree. Every day brought thousands from all corners of Kyril, old and young. Wan

[Turn page]

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dark-eyed men, women, children—dusty, hungry, thirsty—their souls aflame for the peace of the Tree.

They crossed a flat plain covered with small black capsules. To one side a mass of naked men performed calisthenics—jumping, twisting in perfect time.

Hableyat said, "There you see the Druid space-navy."

Joe looked sharply to see if he were indulging in sarcasm but the pudgy face was immobile.

"They don't look very vicious," said Joe.

"They are well suited to the defense of Kyril, which is to say, the Tree. Naturally anyone wishing to defeat the Druids by violence would think to destroy the Tree, thus demolishing the morale of the natives. But in order to destroy the Tree a flotilla must approach relatively close to Kyril, say within a hundred thousand miles, for any accuracy of bombardment.

"The Druids maintain a screen of these little boats a million miles out. They're crude but very fast and agile. Each is equipped with a warhead—in fact they are suicide boats and to date they are admitted to be an effective defense for the Tree."

Joe sat a moment in silence. Then, "Are these boats made here? On Kyril?"

"They are quite simple," said Hableyat with veiled contempt. "A shell, a drive, an oxygen tank. The Lay soldiers are not expected to demand or appreciate comfort. There's a vast number of these little boats. Why not? Labor is free. The idea of cost has no meaning for the Druids. I believe the control equipment is imported from Beland and likewise the firing release. Otherwise the boats are hand-made here on Kyril."

The field full of beetle-boats slanted, faded astern. Ahead appeared the thirty-foot wall surrounding the Terminal. The long glass station stretched along one side of the rectangle. Along another was a line of palatial mansions—the consular offices of off-planets.

Across the field, in the fourth of five

bays, a medium-sized combination freight-passenger vessel rested and Joe saw that it was ready to take off. The cargo hatch had been battened, the loading trams swung back and only a gangplank connected the ship with the ground.

Juliam set the car down in a parking area to the side of the station. Hableyat put a restraining hand on Joe's arm.

"Perhaps—for your own safety—it might be wise if I arranged your passage. The Thearch might have planned some sort of trouble. One never knows where these unpredictable Druids are concerned." He hopped out of the car. "If you'll remain here then—out of sight—I'll return very shortly."

"But the money for the passage—"

"A trifle, a trifle," said Hableyat. "My government has more money than it knows how to spend. Allow me to invest two thousand stiples toward a fund of good will with our legendary Mother Earth."

JOE relaxed dubiously into the seat. Two thousand stiples was two thousand stiples and it would help him on his way back to Earth. If Hableyat thought to hold him under obligation Hableyat was mistaken. He stirred in his seat. Better get out while the getting was good. Things like this did not happen without some unpleasant *quid pro quo*. He raised a hand toward the door and met Juliam's eye. Juliam shook his head.

"No, no, sir. Lord Hableyat will be back at once and his wishes were that you remain out of sight."

In a spasm of defiance, Joe said, "Hableyat can wait."

He jumped from the car and, ignoring Juliam's querulous voice, strode off toward the station. His anger cooled as he walked and in his green-white and black livery he felt conspicuous. Hableyat had a rude habit of being consistently right.

A sign across the walk read, *Costumes*

of all worlds. Change here. Arrive at your destination in a fitting garb.

Joe stepped in. Through the glass window he would be able to see Hableyat if he left the station, returning to the car. The proprietor stood quietly at his command, a tall bony man of nameless race with a wide waxy face, wide guileless eyes of pale blue.

"My Lord wishes?" he inquired in even tones which ignored the servant's livery which Joe was stripping off.

"Get rid of these. Give me something suitable for Ballenkarch."

The shop-keeper bowed. He ran a grave eye over Joe's form, turned to a rack, brought forward a set of garments which made Joe blink—red pantaloons, a tight blue sleeveless jacket, a voluminous white blouse. Joe said doubtfully, "That's not quite—it's not subdued, is it?"

"It is a typical Ballenkarch costume, my Lord—typical, that is to say, among the more civilized clans. The savages wear skins and sacks." He twisted the garments to display front and back. "As it is, it denotes no particular rank. A vavasour hangs a sword at his left side. A grandee of the Vail Alan Court wears a chap-band of black in addition. The Ballenkarch costumes, Lord, are marked by a rather barbaric flamboyance."

Joe said, "Give me a plain gray traveling suit. I'll change to Ballenkarch style when I arrive."

"As you wish, Lord."

The traveling suit was more to his liking. With deep satisfaction Joe zipped close the seams, snugged the ankles and wrists, belted the waist.

"And what style morion, Lord?"

Joe grimaced. Morions were *comme il faut* among the rank of Kyril. Laymen, louts, menials, were denied the affectation of a glistening complex morion. He pointed to a low shell of bright metal with a sweeping rakehell brim. "That one if it will fit."

The shopkeeper bent his form almost into an inverted U. "Yes, your Worship."

Joe glanced at him sharply, then considered the morion he had selected—a glistening beautiful helmet, useful for nothing other than decorative head-dress. It was rather like the one Ecclesiarch Manaolo had worn. He shrugged, jammed it on his head, transferred the contents of his pockets. Gun, money, wallet with identification papers. "How much do I owe you?"

"Two hundred stiples, your Worship."

Joe gave him a pair of notes, stepped out on the arcade. As he walked it occurred to him that his step was firmer, that in fact he was swaggering. The change from livery into the gray suit and swashbuckling morion had altered the color of his psychology. Morale, confidence, will-to-win—they were completely intangible, yet so ultimately definite. Now to find Hableyat.

There was Hableyat ahead of him, walking arm in arm with a Mang in green-blue-and-yellow uniform, speaking very earnestly, very expressively. Joe wished he were able to read lips. The two stopped at the ramp down to the field. The Mang officer bowed curtly, turned, marched back along the arcade. Hableyat ambled down the ramp, started across the field.

It occurred to Joe that he would like to hear what Juliam said to Hableyat and Hableyat's comments on his absence. If he ran to the end of the arcade, jumped the wall, ran around behind the parking lot, he would be able to approach the car from the rear, probably unseen.

SUITING action to thought he turned, raced the length of the terrace, heedless of startled glances. Lowering himself to the blue-green turf he dodged close to the wall, kept as many of the parked cars as possible between himself and the leisurely Hableyat. He reached the car, flung himself to his hands and knees unseen by Juliam, who had his eyes on Hableyat.

Juliam slid back the door. Hableyat said cheerfully, "Now then, my friend,

everything is—" He stopped. Then sharply to Juliam, "Where is he? Where has he gone?"

"He left," said Juliam, "a little after you did."

Hableyat muttered a pungent syllable. "The confounded unpredictability of the man! I gave him strict instructions to remain here."

Juliam said, "I reminded him of your instructions. He ignored me."

"That's the difficulty," said Hableyat, "in dealing with men of limited intellect. They cannot be trusted for logical performance. A thousand times would I prefer to wrestle with a genius. His methods, at least, would be understandable. . . . If Erru Kametin sees him all my plans will be defeated. Oh," he groaned, "the bull-headed fool!"

Juliam sniffed but held his tongue. Hableyat spoke incisively. "You go—look along the arcade. If you see him send him back quickly. I'll wait here. Then telephone Erru Kametin—he'll be at the Consulate. Identify yourself as Aglom Fourteen. He will inquire further and you will reveal that you were an agent for Empoing, who is now dead—that you have important information for his ears."

"He will wish you to appear but you will profess fear of Druid counteraction. You will tell him that you have definitely identified the courier; that he will be traveling with the article in question on the *Belsaurion*. You will give a quick description of this man and then return here."

"Yes, Lord."

Joe heard the shuffle of Juliam's feet. He slid back, ducked behind a long blue carryall, rose to his feet. He saw Juliam cross the field, then by a roundabout route he returned to the car, entered.

Hableyat's eyes were glittering but he said in a careless tone, "So there you are, young man. Where have you been? . . . Ah, new garments, I see. Very wise, very wise, though of course it was rash to appear along the arcade."

He reached into his pouch, came out

with an envelope. "Here is your ticket, Ballenkarch via Junction."

"Junction? What or where is Junction?"

Hableyat put the tips of his fingers together, said in a tone of exaggerated precision, "Kyril, Mangtse and Ballenkarch, as you may be aware, form a triangle approximately equilateral. Junction is an artificial satellite at its center. It is also situated along the Mangtse-Thombol-Beland traffic lane and, at a perpendicular, along the Frums-Outer System passage and so makes a very convenient way station or transfer point."

"It is an interesting place from many aspects. The unique method of construction, the extremities of the efforts made to entertain visitors, the famous Junction Gardens, the cosmopolitan nature of the people encountered there. I'm sure you will find it an interesting voyage."

"I imagine I shall," said Joe.

Hableyat glanced at him sharply. "But also a word of caution. The Druids," he chose his words carefully, "with their anachronistic thought-processes, are fanatic on the subject of vengeance. And they stop at nothing."

"There will be spies aboard—everywhere, indeed, there are spies. One cannot move his foot without kicking a spy. Their instructions in regard to you may or may not include violence. I counsel the utmost vigilance—though, as is well known, a skillful assassin cannot be denied opportunity."

Joe said with grim good-humor, "I've got a gun."

Hableyat met his eyes with limpid innocence. "Good—excellent. Now the ship leaves almost any minute. You had better get aboard. I won't go with you but wish you good luck from here."

Joe jumped to the ground. "Thanks for your efforts," he said evenly.

Hableyat raised a monitory hand. "No thanks, please. I'm glad that I'm able to assist a fellow-man when he's in trouble. Although there is a slight serv-

ice I'd like you to render me. I've promised my friend, the Prince of Ballenkarch, a sample of the lovely Kyril heather and perhaps you will convey him this little pot with my regards."

Hableyat displayed a plant growing in an earthenware pot. "I'll put it in this bag. Please be careful with it. Water it once a week if you will."

Joe accepted the potted plant. A hoot from the ship's horn rang across the field. "Hurry then," said Hableyat. "Perhaps we'll meet again some day."

"Goodby," said Joe. He turned, walked toward the ship, anxious now to embark.

Last-minute passengers were crossing the field from the station. Joe stared at a couple not fifty feet distant—a tall broad-shouldered young man with the face of a malicious satyr, a slender dark-haired girl—Manaolo and the Priestess Elfane.

V

THE skeleton-work of the embarkation stage made a black web on the overcast sky. Joe climbed the worn plank stairs to the top deck. No one was behind. No one observed him. He reached under an L-beam, set the potted plant on the flange out of sight. Whatever it was, it was dangerous. He wanted nothing to do with it. Hableyat's *quid pro quo*s might come high.

Joe smiled sourly. "Limited intellect" and "bull-headed fool"—there was an ancient aphorism, to the effect that eavesdroppers hear no good of themselves. It seemed to apply in his own case.

Joe thought, *I've been called worse things. And once I get to Ballenkarch it won't make any difference. . . .*

Ahead of him Manaolo and Elfane crossed the stage, looking neither to right or left but straight ahead with that fixed and conscious will characteristic of the Druids. They climbed the gangplank, turned into the ship. Joe grimaced. Elfane's slim legs twinkling up the stairs had sent sweet-sour chills

along his nerves. And the proud back of Manaolo—it was like taking two drugs with precisely opposite effects.

Joe cursed old Hableyat. Did he imagine that Joe would be so obsessed with infatuation for the Priestess Elfane as to challenge Manaolo? Joe snorted. *Over-ripe old hypocrite!* In the first place he had no slightest intimation that Elfane would consider him as a lover. And after Manaolo's handling of her—his stomach muscles twisted. Even, he amended dutifully, if his loyalty to Margaret would permit his interest. He had enough problems of his own without inviting others.

At the gangplank stood a steward in a red skin-tight uniform. Rows of trefoil gold frogs decorated his legs, a radio was clamped to his ear with a mike pressed to his throat. He was a member of a race strange to Joe—white-haired, loose-jointed, with eyes as green as emeralds.

Joe felt the tenseness rising up in himself, if the Thearch suspected that he were on his way off-planet, now he would be stopped.

The steward took his ticket, nodded courteously, motioned him within. Joe crossed the gangplank to the convex black hulk, entered the shadowed double port. At a temporary desk sat the purser, another man of the white-haired race. Like the steward he wore a scarlet suit which seemed like a second skin. In addition he wore glass epaulets and a small scarlet skullcap.

He extended a book to Joe. "Your name and thumb-print, please. They waive responsibility for accidents incurred en route."

Joe signed, pressed his thumb on the indicated square while the purser examined his ticket. "First class passage, Cabin Fourteen. Luggage, Worship?"

"I have none," said Joe. "I imagine there's a ship's store where I can buy linen."

"Yes, your Worship, yes indeed. Now, if you'll kindly step to your cabin, a steward will secure you for take-off."

Joe glanced down at the book he had signed. Immediately before his signature he read in a tall angular hand, *Druid Manaolo kia Benlodieth*, and then in a round backhand script, *Alnietho kia Benlodieth*. Signed as his wife—Joe chewed at his lip. Manaolo was assigned to Cabin Twelve, Elfane to 13.

Not strange in itself. These freighter-passenger ships, unlike the great passenger packets flashing out from Earth in every direction, offered little accommodation for passengers. Cabins, so-called, were closets with hammocks, drawers, tiny collapsible bathroom facilities.

A steward in the skin-tight garment, this time a firefly blue, said, "This way, Lord Smith."

Joe thought—to excite reverence all a man needed was a tin hat.

He followed the steward past the hold, where the steerage passengers already lay entranced and bundled into their hammocks, then through a combination saloon-dining room. The far wall was faced with two tiers of doors, with a web-balcony running under the second tier. No. 14 was the last door on the top row.

As the steward led Joe past No. 13 the door was thrust aside and Manaolo came bursting out. His face was pale, his eyes widened to curious elliptical shape, showing the full disk of the dead black retinas. He was plainly in a blind fury. He shouldered Joe aside, opened the door to No. 12, passed within.

Joe slowly pulled himself back from the rail. For an instant all sense, all reason, had left him. It was a curious sensation—one unknown to him before. An unlimited elemental aversion which even Harry Creath had never aroused. He turned slowly back along the catwalk.

Elfane stood in the door of her cabin. She had removed the blue cloak and stood in her soft white dress—a dark-haired girl with a narrow face, mobile and alive, now clenched in anger. Her eyes met Joe's. For an instant they stared eye to eye, faces two feet apart.

The hate in Joe's heart moved over for another emotion, a wonderful lift into clean air, a delight, a ferment. Her eyebrows contracted in puzzlement, she half-opened her mouth to speak. Joe wondered with a queer sinking feeling, if she recognized him? Their previous contacts had been so careless, so impersonal. He was a new man in his new clothes.

She turned, shut the door. Joe continued to No. 14, where the steward webbed him into his hammock for the take-off.

JOE awoke from the take-off trance. He said, "Whatever you're looking for, I haven't got it. Hableyat gave you a bum steer."

The man across the cabin froze into stillness, back turned toward Joe.

Joe said, "Don't move, I've got my gun on you."

He jerked up from the hammock but the webbing held him. At the sound of his efforts the intruder stole a glance over his shoulder, ducked, slid from the cabin like a ghost.

Joe called out harshly but there was no sound. Throwing off the web he ran to the door, looked out into the saloon. It was empty.

Joe turned back, shut the door. Waking from the trance he had no clear picture of his visitor. A man short and stocky, moving on joints set at curious splayed angles. There had been a flashing glimpse of the man's face but all Joe could recall was a sallow yellow tinge as if the underlying blood ran bright yellow. A Mang.

Joe thought, *Now it's starting. Damn Hableyat, setting me up as his stalking horse!* He considered reporting to the captain, who, neither Druid nor Mang, might be unsympathetic to lawlessness aboard his ship. He decided against the action. He had nothing to report—merely a prowler in his cabin. The captain would hardly put the entire passenger list through a psycho-reading merely to apprehend a prowler.

Joe rubbed his face, yawned. Out in

space once more, on the last leg of his trip. Unless, of course, Harry had moved on again.

He raised the stop-ray shield in front of the port, looked out into space. Ahead, in the direction of flight, a buffer-screen absorbed what radiation the ship either overtook or met. Otherwise the energy, increased in frequency and hardness by the Doppler action due to the ship's velocity, would have crisped him instantly.

Light impinging from abeam showed him stars more or less with their normal magnitudes, the perspectives shifting and roiling as he watched—and the stars floating, eddying, drifting like motes in a beam of light. To the stern was utter darkness—no light could overtake the vessel. Joe dropped the shutter. The scene was familiar enough to him. Now for a bath, his clothes, food. . . .

Looking at his face in the mirror he noticed a stubble of beard. The shaver lay on a glass shelf over the collapsible sink. Joe reached—yanked his hand to a halt, an inch from the shaver. When first he had entered the cabin it had hung from a clasp on the bulkhead.

Joe eased himself away from the wall, his nerves tingling. Certainly his visitor had not been shaving? He looked down to the deck—saw a mat of coiled woven brass. Bending, he noticed a length of copper wire joining the mat to the drain pipe.

Gingerly he scooped the shaver into his shoe, carried it to his bunk. A metal band circled the handle with a tit entering the case near the unit which scooped power from the ship's general field.

In the long run, thought Joe, he had Hableyat to thank—Hableyat who had so kindly rescued him from the Thearch and put him aboard the *Belsaurion* with a potted plant.

Joe rang for the steward. A young woman came, white-haired like the other members of the crew. She wore a particular short-skirted garment of orange and blue that fitted her like a coat of paint. Joe dumped the shaver into a

pillow-case. He said, "Take this to the electrician. It's very dangerous—got a short in it. Don't touch it. Don't let anyone touch it. And—will you please bring me another shaver?"

"Yes, sir." She departed.

Finally bathed, shaved and as well-dressed as his limited wardrobe permitted, he sauntered out into the saloon, stepping high in the ship's half-gravity. Four or five men and women sat along the lounges to the side, engaging in guarded conversation.

Joe stood watching a moment. Peculiar, artificial creatures, he thought, these human beings of the Space Age—brittle and so completely formal that conversation was no more than an exchange of polished mannerisms. So sophisticated that nothing could shock them as much as naive honesty.

THREE Mangs sat in the group—two men, one old, the other young, both wearing the rich uniforms of the Mangtse Red-Branch. A young Mang woman with a certain heavy beauty, evidently the wife of the young officer. The other couple, like the race which operated the ship, were human deviants unfamiliar to Joe. They were like pictures he had seen in a childhood fairy-book—wispy fragile creatures, big-eyed, thin-skinned, dressed in loose sheer gowns.

Joe descended the stairs to the main deck and a ship's officer, the head steward presumably, appeared. Gesturing politely to Joe he spoke to the entire group. "I present Lord Joe Smith of the planet"—he hesitated—"the planet Earth."

He turned to the others in the group. "Erru Kametin"—this was the older of the two Mang officers—"Erru Ex Amma and Erritu Thi Amma, of Mangtse." He turned to the fairy-like creatures. "Prater Luli Hassimassa and his lady Hermina of Cil."

Joe bowed politely, seated himself at the end of the lounge. The young Mang officer, Erru Ex Amma, asked curiously,

"Did I understand that you claim *Earth* for your home planet?"

"Yes," said Joe half-truculently. "I was born on the continent known as North America, where the first ship ever to leave Earth was built."

"Strange," muttered the Mang, eying Joe with an expression just short of disbelief. "I've always considered talk of Earth one of the superstitions of space, like the Moons of Paradise and the Star Dragon."

"I can assure you that Earth is no legend," said Joe. "Somehow in the outward migrations, among the wars and the planetary programs of propaganda, the real existence of Earth has been called to question. And we travel very rarely into this outer swirl of the galaxy."

The fairy-woman spoke in a piping voice which suited her moth-frail appearance. "And you maintain that all of us—you, the Mangs, we Cils, the Belands who operate the ship, the Druids, the Frumsans, the Thablites—they are *all* ultimately derived from Earth stock?"

"Such is the fact."

A metallic voice said, "That is not entirely true. The Druids were the first fruit of the Tree of Life. That is the well-established doctrine, and any other allegation is false."

Joe said in a careful voice, "You are entitled to your belief."

The steward came forward. "Ecclesi-arch Manaolo kia Benlodieth of Kyril."

There was a moment of silence after the introductions. Then Manaolo said, "Not only am I entitled to my belief, but I must protest the propagation of incorrect statements."

"That also is your privilege," said Joe. "Protest all you like."

He met Manaolo's dead black eyes and there seemed no human understanding behind them, no thought—only emotion and obstinate will.

There was movement behind; it was Priestess Elfane. She was presented to the company and without words she set-

tled beside Hermina of Cil. The atmosphere now had changed and even though she but murmured pleasantries with Hermina her presence brought a piquancy, a sparkle, a spice . . .

Joe counted. Eight with himself—fourteen cabins—six passengers yet unaccounted for. One of the thirteen had tried to kill him—a Mang.

A pair of Druids issued from cabins two and three, and were introduced—elderly sheep-faced men en route to a mission on Ballenkarch. They carried with them a portable altar, which they immediately set up in a corner of the saloon, and began a series of silent rites before a small representation of the Tree. Manaolo watched them without interest a moment or two, then turned away.

Four unaccounted for, thought Joe.

The steward announced the first meal of the day, and at this moment another couple appeared from their cabins, two Mangs in non-military attire—loose wrappings of colored silk, light loose cloaks, jewelled corselets. They bowed formally to the company and, since the steward was arranging the collapsible table, they took their places without introduction. Five Mangs, thought Joe. Two soldiers, two civilians, a woman. Two cabins still concealed their occupants.

CABIN No. 10 opened, and an aged woman of extreme height stepped slowly out on the balcony. She was bald as an egg and her head was flat on top. She had a great bony nose, black bulging eyes. She wore a black cape and on each finger of both hands was a tremendous jewel.

One more to go. The door to cabin No. 6 remained closed.

The meal was served from a menu surprisingly varied, to serve the palates of many races. Joe, in his planet-to-planet journey across the galaxy, perforce had dismissed all queasiness. He had eaten organic matter of every conceivable color, consistency, odor and flavor.

Familiar items he could put a name to—ferns, fruits, fungus, roots, reptiles, insects, fish, molluscs, slugs, eggs, sporesacs, animals and birds—and at least as many objects he could neither define nor recognize and whose sole claim to his appetite lay in the example of others.

His place at the table was directly opposite Manaolo and Elfane. He noticed that they did not speak and several times he felt her eyes on him, puzzled, appraising, half-furtive. *She's sure she's seen me*, thought Joe, *but she can't remember where.*

After the meal the passengers separated. Manaolo retired to the gymnasium behind the saloon. The five Mangs sat down to a game played with small rods of different colors. The Cils went up to the promenade along the back rib of the ship. The tall demon-woman sat in a chair, gazing blankly into nothingness.

Joe would likewise have taken exercise in the gymnasium but the presence of Manaolo deterred him. He selected a film from the ship's library, prepared to return to his room.

Priestess Elfane said in a low voice, "Lord Smith, I wish to speak to you."
"Certainly."

"Will you come to my room?"

Joe looked over his shoulder. "Won't your husband be annoyed?"

"Husband?" She managed to inject an enormous weight of contempt and angry disgust into her voice. "The relationship is purely nominal." She stopped, looked away, apparently regretting her words. Then she continued in a cool voice, "I wish to speak to you." She turned away, marched for her cabin.

Joe chuckled quietly. The vixen knew no other world than that in her own brain, had no conception that wills could exist in opposition to hers. Amusing now—but what a devil when she grew older! It occurred to Joe that it would be a pleasant experience to be lost with her on an uninhabited planet—taming her wilfulness, opening up her consciousness.

He leisurely followed to her cabin. She sat on the bunk. He took a seat on the bench. "Well?"

"You say your home is the planet Earth—the mythical Earth. Is that true?"

"Yes, it's true."

"Where is Earth?"

"In toward the Center, perhaps a thousand light-years."

"What is Earth like?" She leaned forward, elbow on her knee, chin on her elbow, watching him with interested eyes.

Joe, suddenly flustered, shrugged. "You ask a question I can't answer in a word. Earth is a world of great age. Everywhere are ancient buildings, ancient cities, traditions. In Egypt stand the Great Pyramids, built by the first civilized men. In England a circle of chipped stones, Stonehenge, are relics of a race almost as old. In the caves of France and Spain, far underground, are drawings of animals, scratched by men hardly removed from the beasts they hunted."

SHE drew a deep breath. "But your cities, your civilization—are they different from ours?"

Joe put on a judicious expression. "Naturally they are different. No two planets are alike. Ours is an old stable culture—mellowed, kindly. Our races have merged—I am the result of their mingling. In these outer regions men have been blocked off and separated and have specialized once again. You Druids, who are very close to us physically, correspond to the ancient Caucasian race of the Mediterranean branch."

"But do you have no Great God—no Tree of Life?"

"At present," said Joe, "there is no organized religion on Earth. We are free to express our joy at being alive in any way which pleases us. Some revere a cosmic creator—others merely acknowledge the physical laws controlling the universe to almost the same result. The worship of fetishes, anthro-

poid, animal or vegetable—like your Tree—has long been extinct.”

SHE sat up sharply. “You—you deride our sacred institution.”

“Sorry.”

She rose to her feet, then sat down, swallowing her wrath. “You interest me in many ways,” she said sullenly, as if justifying her forbearance to herself. “I have the peculiar feeling that you are known to me.”

Joe, on a half-sadistic impulse, said, “I was your father’s chauffeur. Yesterday you and your—husband were planning to kill me.”

She froze into unblinking rigidity, staring, mouth half-open. Then she relaxed, shuddered, shrank back. “You—are you—”

But Joe had caught sight of something behind her on a night-shelf over her bunk—a potted plant, almost identical with the one he had left on Kyril.

She saw the direction of his gaze. Her mouth came shut. She gasped, “You know then!” It was almost a whisper. “Kill me, destroy me, I am tired of life!”

She rose to her feet, arms out defenselessly. Joe arose, moved a step toward her. It was like a dream, a time past the edge of reason, without logic, cause, effect. Her eyes widened, not in fear now. He put his hands on her shoulders. She was warm and slender, pulsing like a bird.

She pulled away, sat back on her bed. “I don’t understand,” she said in a husky voice. “I understand nothing.”

“Tell me,” said Joe in a voice almost as husky. “What is this Manaolo to you? Is he your lover?”

She said nothing; then at last gave her head a little shake. “No, he is nothing. He has been sent to Ballenkarch on a mission. I decided I wanted release from the rituals. I wanted adventure, and cared nothing for consequence. But Manaolo frightens me. He came to me yesterday—but I was afraid.”

Joe felt a wonderful yeastiness around his heart. The image of Margaret ap-

peared, mouth puckered accusingly. Joe sighed regretfully. The mood changed. Elfane’s face was once more that of a young Druid Priestess.

“What is your business, Smith?” she asked coolly. “Are you a spy?”

“No, I’m not a spy.”

“Then why do you go to Ballenkarch? Only spies and agents go to Ballenkarch. Druids and Mangs or their hirelings.”

“It is business of a personal nature.” Looking at her he reflected that this vivid Priestess Elfane had gaily suggested killing him only yesterday.

She noticed his scrutiny, tilted her head in a whimsical harlequin grimace—the trick of a girl aware of her appeal, a flirtatious trick. Joe laughed—stopped, listened. There had been a scrapping sound against the wall. Elfane followed his gaze.

“That’s my cabin!” Joe rose to his feet, opened the door, bounded down the balcony, threw open the door to his cabin. Erru Ex Amma, the young Mang officer, stood facing him, a wide mirthless grin on his face, showing pointed yellow teeth. He held a gun which was directed at Joe’s middle.

“Back up! he ordered. “Back!”

Joe slowly retreated out on the balcony. He looked over into the saloon. The four Mangs were at their game. One of the civilians glanced up, muttered to the others and they all turned their heads, looked up. Joe caught the flash of four citron-yellow faces. Then they were back to their game.

“Into the she-Druid’s cabin,” said Ex Amma. “Quick!” He moved his gun, still smiling the wide smile that was like a fox showing its fangs.

Joe slowly backed into Elfane’s cabin, eyes flicking back and forth between the gun and the Mang’s face.

Elfane gasped, sighed in terror. The Mang saw the pot with the bit of plant sprouting from it. “Ahhhh!”

He turned to Joe. “Back against the wall.” He gave his gun a little forward motion, grimaced with anticipation and

Joe knew he was about to die.

The door behind slid open; there was a hiss. The Mang stiffened, bent backward in an agonized arc, threw up his head, his jaw strained in a soundless scream. He fell to the deck.

Hableyat stood in the doorway, smiling primly. "I'm very sorry that there should have been this disturbance."

VI

HABLEYAT'S eyes went to the plant on the shelf. He shook his head, clicked his tongue, turned a reproachful gaze on Joe. "My dear fellow, you have been instrumental in ruining a very careful plan."

"If you had asked me," said Joe, "if I wanted to donate my life to the success of your schemes I could have saved you a lot of grief."

Hableyat bleated his laugh without moving a muscle of his face. "You are charming. I am happy that you are still with us. But now I fear there is to be a quarrel."

The three Mangs were marching in belligerent single-file along the balcony, the old officer, Erru Kametin, in the lead, followed by the two civilians. Erru Kametin came to a stiff halt, bristling like an angry cur. "Lord Hableyat, this is sheer outrage. You have interfered with an officer of the Reach in his duty."

"Interfered?" protested Hableyat. "I have killed him. As to his 'duty'—since when has a rakehelly Redbranch tag-at-heels been ranked with a member of the Ampianu General?"

"We have our orders direct from Magnerru Ippolito. You have no slightest supercession—"

"Magnerru Ippolito, if you recall," said Hableyat smoothly, "is reponsible to the Lathbon, who sits with the Blue-water on the General."

"A pack of white-blooded cravens!" shouted the officer. "You and the rest of the Bluewaters!"

The Mang woman on the main deck, who had been straining to glimpse the

events on the balcony, screamed. Then came Manaolo's metallic voice. "Miserable dingy dogs!"

He bounded up to the balcony, lithe and strong, tremendous in his fury. With one hand he seized the shoulder of one civilian, hurled him to the catwalk, did the same for the other. He lifted Erru Kametin, tossed him bodily over the balcony. Dropping slowly in the half-gravity Erru Kametin landed with a grunt. Manaolo turned to Hableyat, who held out a protesting hand.

"A moment, Ecclesiarch, please use no force on my poor corpulence."

The wild face showed no flicker of emotion. The crouch of his body was answer to Hableyat's words.

Joe drew in his breath, stepped forward, threw a left jab, a hard right and Manaolo sprawled to the deck, where he lay looking at Joe with dead-black eyes.

"Sorry," lied Joe. "But Hableyat just saved my life and Elfane's. Give him time to talk anyway."

Manaolo jumped to his feet, without a word entered Elfane's cabin, shut and locked the door. Hableyat turned, stared quizzically at Joe. "We have returned each other compliments."

Joe said "I'd like to know what's going on. No, I don't either—I want to mind my own business. I have my own troubles. I wish you'd keep yours to yourself."

Hableyat shook his head slowly as if in puzzled admiration. "For one of your professed intent you hurl yourself into the thick of things. But if you'll come to my cabin I have an excellent aquavit which will form the basis of a pleasant relaxation."

"Poison?" inquired Joe.

Hableyat shook his head gravely. "Merely excellent brandy."

THE captain of the vessel called a meeting of the passengers. He was a large heavy man with dead-white hair, a flat-white face, liquid-green eyes, a thin pink mouth. He wore the Beland skin-tight garment of dark-green with

glass epaulets and a scarlet ruff above each elbow.

The passengers sat in the deep couches—the two civilian Mangs; the woman, red-eyed from crying, Erru Kametin, Hableyat, serene and easy in a loose robe of a dull white stuff with Joe next to him. Beside Joe sat the gaunt bald woman in the black gown and she had a sickly-sweet odor about her that was neither floral nor animal. Then came the Cils, then the two Druids, placid and secure, then Elfane and last, Manaolo. He wore a striking garment of light-green sateen with gold striping along the legs. A light flat morion perched jauntily on his dark curls.

The captain spoke ponderously. "I am aware that a tension exists between the worlds of Kyril and Mangtse. But this ship is the property of Belan, and we are resolved to remain dispassionate and neutral.

"There was a killing this morning. So far as I have been able to gather Erru Ex Amma was discovered searching the cabin of Lord Smith and, when apprehended, forced Smith into the cabin of the Priestess Alnietho"—using the name Elfane had signed to the passenger list—"where he threatened to kill them both. Lord Hableyat, in a praiseworthy effort to avoid an interplanetary incident, appeared and killed his countryman Erru Ex Amma.

"The other Mangs, protesting, were engaged violently by Ecclesiarch Manaolo, who also began to attack Lord Hableyat. Lord Smith, anxious lest Manaolo, in his ignorance of the true state of affairs, injure Lord Hableyat, struck Manaolo with his fist. I believe, in essence, that is the gist of the affair."

He paused. No one spoke. Hableyat sat twiddling his forefingers around each other with his plump lower lips hanging loose. Joe was aware of Elfane sitting stiff and silent and he felt a slow look from Manaolo drift over him—his face, shoulders, legs.

The captain continued. "To the best of my belief, the culprit in this case,

Erru Ex Amma, has been punished by death. The rest of you are guilty of nothing more than hot tempers. But I do not propose to countenance further incidents. On any such occasion the participants will be hypnotized and webbed into their hammocks for the duration of the voyage.

"It is Beland tradition that our ships are neutral ground and our livelihood stems from this reputation. I will not see it challenged. Quarrels, personal or interplanetary, must wait till you are away from my authority." He bowed heavily. "Thank you for your attention."

The Mangs immediately arose, the woman departing for her cabin to weep, the three men to their game with the colored bars, Hableyat to the promenade. The gaunt woman sat without movement, staring at the spot where the captain had stood. The Cils wandered to the ship's library. The Druid missionaries converged on Manaolo.

Elfane arose, stretched her slim young arms, looked quickly toward Joe, then to Manaolo's broad back. She made up her mind, crossed the room to Joe, settled on the couch beside him. "Tell me, Lord Smith—what did Hableyat talk to you about when he took you to his room?"

Joe moved uneasily in his seat. "Priestess—I can't be a tale-bearer between Druids and Mangs. In this particular case we spoke of nothing very important. He asked me about my life on Earth, he was interested in the man I've come out here seeking. I described a number of the planets I've stopped at. We drank a good deal of brandy, and that was about all there was to it."

Elfane bit her lip impatiently. "I cannot understand why Hableyat protected us from the young Mang . . . What does he gain? He is as completely Mang as the other. He would die rather than allow the Druids to take sovereignty over Ballenkarch."

Joe said, "You and Manaolo are certainly not en route to take over sovereignty of Ballenkarch?"

She gave him a wide-eyed stare, then drummed her fingers on her leg. Joe smiled to himself. In anyone else the assumptions of unlimited authority would be a matter of serious irritation. In Elfane—Joe, charmed and bewitched, dismissed it as an intriguing mannerism. He laughed.

"Why do you laugh?" she asked suspiciously.

"You remind me of a kitten dressed up in doll's clothes—very proud of itself."

She flushed, her eyes sparkled. "So—you laugh at me!"

After an instant of contemplation Joe asked, "Don't you ever laugh at yourself?"

"No. Of course not."

"Try it some time." He arose to his feet, went to the gymnasium.

VII

JOE worked up a sweat in an obstacle treadmill, jumped out, sat panting on the bench. Manaolo came slowly into the gymnasium, looked up and down the floor, then slowly back to Joe. Joe thought, *Here comes trouble.*

Manaolo glanced back over his shoulder, then turned, crossed the room in three strides. He stood looking down at Joe. His face was not a man's face but a glimpse into a fantasy of the underworld.

He said, "You touched me with your hands."

"Touched you, hell!" said Joe. "I knocked you A over T."

Manaolo's mouth, tender enough to be a woman's but also hard and muscular, sunk at the corners. He writhed his shoulders, leaned forward, kicked. Joe bent double in silent agony, clasp- ing his lower abdomen. Manaolo stepped lightly back, kicked under Joe's jaw.

Joe slid slowly, laxly to the deck. Manaolo bent swiftly, a little metal device glittering in his hands. Joe raised his arm feebly—Manaolo kicked it aside. He hooked the metal instrument in Joe's

nostrils, jerked. Two little hooked knives sliced the cartilage. A cloud of powder seared the flesh.

Manaolo jumped back, the corners of his mouth pushed in deeper. He turned on his heel, swung jauntily out of the room.

* * * * *

The ship's doctor said, "There—it's not too bad. You'll have the two scars for awhile but they shouldn't be too noticeable."

Joe examined his reflection in the mirror—his bruised chin, the plastered nose. "Well—I've still got a nose."

"You've still got a nose," the doctor agreed woodenly. "Lucky I got you in time. I've had some experience with that powder. It's a hormone promoting the growth of skin. If it hadn't been removed, the splits would be permanent and you'd have three flaps on your face."

"You understand," said Joe, "this was an accident. I wouldn't want to trouble the captain with any report and I hope you won't."

The doctor shrugged, turned, put away his equipment. "Strange accident."

Joe returned to the saloon. The Cils were learning the game with the colored bars, chatting gaily with the Mangs. The Druid missionaries, heads together, were performing some intricate ritual at their portable altar. Hableyat was spread comfortably on a couch, examining his fingernails with every evidence of satisfaction. The door from Elfane's cabin opened, Manaolo stepped out, swung easily along the balcony, down the steps. He gave Joe an expressionless glance, turned up toward the promenade.

Joe settled beside Hableyat, felt his nose tenderly. "It's still there."

Hableyat nodded composedly. "It will be as good as new in a week or two. These Beland medics are apt, very apt. Now on Kyril, where doctors are non-existent, the man of the Laity would apply a poultice of some vile material and

the wound would never heal.

"You will notice a large number of the Laity with tri-cleft noses. Next to killing it is a favorite Druid punishment." He surveyed Joe from under half-closed lids. "You seem to be rather less exercised than would be permissible under the circumstances."

"I'm not pleased."

"Let me cite you a facet of Druid psychology," said Hableyat. "In Manaolo's mind the infliction of the wound terminated the matter. It was the final decisive act in the quarrel between you two. On Kyril the Druids act without fear of retaliation in the name of the Tree. It gives them a peculiar sense of infallibility. Now, I mention this merely to point out that Manaolo will be surprised and outraged if you pursue the matter farther."

Joe shrugged.

HABLEYAT said in a querulous voice, "You say nothing, you make no threats, you voice no anger."

Joe smiled a rather thin smile. "I haven't had time for much but amazement. Give me time."

Hableyat nodded.

"Ah, I see. You were shocked by the attack."

"Very much so."

Hableyat nodded again, a series of wise little jerks that set his dewlaps quivering. "Let us change the subject then. Now your description of the European pre-Christian Druids interests me."

"Tell me something," said Joe. "What is that pot that all the fuss is about? Some kind of message or formula or military secret?"

Hableyat's eyes widened. "Message? Military secret? What *are* these? No, my dear fellow, to the best of my knowledge the pot is merely an honest pot and the plant an honest plant."

"Why the excitement then? And why try to stick me with a ringer?"

Hableyat said musingly, "Sometimes in affairs of planetary scope it becomes

necessary to sacrifice the convenience of one person for the eventual benefit of many. You were to carry the plant to decoy my pistol-flourishing compatriots from that conveyed by the Druids."

"I don't get it," said Joe. "Aren't you both working for the same government?"

"Oh indeed," said Hableyat. "Our aims are identical—the glorification and prosperity of our beloved planet. No one is more dedicated than myself. But there is a rather odd cleavage in the Mang system, separating the Redbranch Militars from the Bluewater Commercials. They exist like two souls in one body, two husbands married to the same wife.

"Both love Mangtse. Both use their peculiar means for displaying this love. To some extent they cooperate but only as is expedient. They are ultimately responsible only to the Lathbon and, a step lower, to the Ampianu General, in which body both seat members. In many ways the arrangement works well—sometimes two approaches to a problem are valuable.

"In general the Redbranch is direct and forceful. They believe that the best way to end our difficulties with the Druids is to seize the planet in a military operation. We Bluewaters point out that many men would be killed, much material destroyed and, if by some miracle we finally overcame the religion-crazed hordes of the Laity, we would have destroyed whatever usefulness Kyril might have for us.

"You see," he nodded wisely at Joe, "with a productive peasantry Kyril can produce the raw materials and hand-crafts for our Mang industries. We form a natural couple but the current Druid policy is a disturbing factor. An industrialized Ballenkarch ruled by the Druids would upset the balance. Now the Redbranches want to destroy the Druids. We Bluewaters hope to influence a gradual metamorphosis toward an economy on Kyril channeled into production instead of into the Tree."

"And how do you propose to work that out?"

Hableyat wagged a solemn finger. "In the strictest confidence, my dear fellow—by letting the Druids proceed undisturbed with their intrigues."

Joe frowned, touched his nose absently. "But—this flowerpot—how does it enter the picture?"

"That," said Hableyat, "is what the poor single-minded Druids conceive to be the most cogent instrument of their plan. I hope it will be one of the instruments of their defeat. So I mean to see that the pot reaches Ballenkarch if I must kill twenty of my fellow Mangs in the process."

"If you're telling the truth, which I doubt—"

"But my dear fellow, why should I lie to you?"

"—I commence to understand some of this madhouse."

JUNCTION—a many-sided polyhedron one mile in diameter, swimming in a diffused luminescence. A dozen spaceships suckled up close like leeches and nearby space was thick with firefly flecks of light—men and women in air-suits, drifting through the void, venturing off ten, twenty, thirty miles, feeling the majesty of deep space.

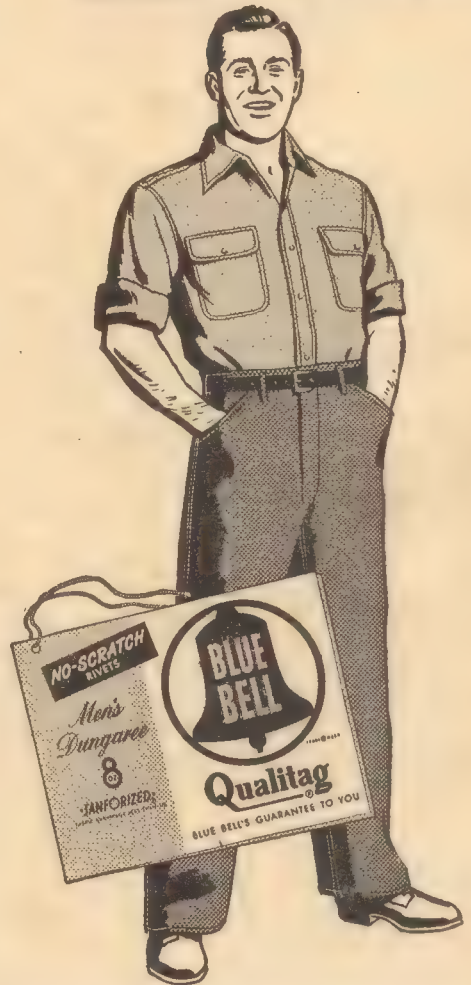
There seemed to be no formalities connected with landing—a matter which surprised Joe, who had become accustomed to elaborate checking and re-checking, indexes, reserve numbers, inspections, quarantine, passes, visas, reviews, signatures and countersignatures. The *Belsaurion* nosed up to a vacant port, clamped itself to the seal with mesonic glue-fields and so came to rest.

The hypnots in the hold lay undisturbed.

The Beland captain once again called a meeting of the passengers. "We are now at Junction, and will remain thirty-two hours while we take on mail and freight. Now some of you have been

[Turn page]

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here before. I need not caution you to discretion.

"For those who visit Junction for the first time I will state that it lies in no planet's jurisdiction, that its law is at the whim of the owner and his comptroller, that their main interest is in extracting money from your pockets through pleasures and pastimes of various natures.

"Thus I urge you, beware of the gambling cages. I say to you women—do not enter the Perfume Park alone for that is a signal that you wish a paid escort. The men who patronize Tier Three will find it expensive and perhaps dangerous. There have been cases of murder for robbery reported. A man engrossed with a girl is an easy target for a knife. Again films have been made of persons engaged in questionable acts, and these have been used for blackmail.

"Lastly let no desire for excitement or thrill take you down to the Arena—because you may easily be forced into the ring and set to fighting an expert warrior. Once you pay admission you put yourself at the choice of whoever is victor at the moment. It is astonishing how many casual visitors, whether under the influence of drugs, alcohol, lust for excitement or sheer bravado, dare the Arena. A good number of them are killed or seriously injured.

"Enough for the warnings. I do not wish to alarm you. There are a number of legitimate pleasures you may indulge in. The Nineteen Gardens are the talk of the Universe. In the Celestium you may dine on food of your planet, hear your native music. The shops along the Esplanade sell anything you may desire at very reasonable prices.

"So with this warning I put you on your own. Thirty-two hours from now we leave for Ballenkarch."

He withdrew. There was a general shuffling of feet. Joe noticed that Manaolo followed Elfane to her cabin. The two Druid missionaries returned to their portable altar, apparently with no

intention of going ashore. The Mang officer, Erru Kametin, marched off with the young widow at his heels and after them went the two Mangs in civilian dress.

The gaunt bald old woman moved not an inch from her chair but sat staring across the floor. The Cils, giggling, stepping high, rushed from the ship. Hableyat stopped before Joe, plump arms clasped behind his back. "Well, my friend, are you going ashore?"

"Yes," said Joe. "I think I probably will. I'm waiting to see what the Priestess and Manaolo will do."

Hableyat teetered on his heels. "Steer clear of that chap is my best advice. He's a vicious example of megalomania—conditioned, I may add, to its most exquisite pitch by his environment. Manaolo considers himself divine and ordained—actually, literally—to a degree neither of us can imagine. Manaolo knows no right or wrong. He knows pro-and con Manaolo."

The door to cabin 13 opened. Manaolo and Elfane stepped out on the balcony. Manaolo, in the lead, carried a small parcel. He wore a chased cuirass of gold and bright metal and a long green cloak, embroidered with yellow leaves, was flung back from his shoulders. Looking to neither right nor left he strode down the stairs, across the cabin, out the port.

Elfane halted on reaching the saloon deck, looked after him, shook her head—a motion eloquent of annoyance. She turned, crossed the saloon to Joe and Hableyat.

Hableyat made a respectful inclination of the head, which Elfane acknowledged coolly. She said to Joe, "I want you to conduct me ashore."

"Is that an invitation or an order?"

Elfane raised her eyebrows quizzically. "It means I want you to take me ashore."

"Very well," said Joe, rising to his feet. "I'll be glad to."

Hableyat sighed. "If only I were young and handsome—"

Joe snorted. "Handsome?"

"—no lovely young lady would need to ask me twice."

Elfane said in a tight voice, "I think it's only fair to mention that Manaolo promised to kill you if he finds you talking to me."

There was silence. Then Joe said in a voice that sounded strange in his own ears, "So the very first thing, you come over and ask me to take you ashore."

"Are you frightened?"

"I'm not brave."

She turned sharply, started for the port. Hableyat said curiously, "Why did you do that?"

Joe snorted angrily. "She's a trouble-maker. She has a ridiculous notion that I'll risk some crazy Druid shooting me down like a dog merely for the privilege of walking her around." He watched her leave the ship, slim as a birch in her dark blue cape. "She's right," said Joe. "I *am* just that kind of damn fool."

He started off after her on the run. Hableyat watched them go off together, smiled sadly, rubbed his hands together. Then unbuckling the robe from around his paunch, he sat back on the couch once again, dreamily followed the devotions of the two Druids at their altar.

VIII

THEY were walking down a corridor lined with small shops. "Look," said Joe, "are you a Druid Priestess, about as likely to lop the life out of a commoner as not—or are you a nice kid out on a date?"

Elfane tossed her head, tried to look dignified and worldly. "I am a very important person and one day I will be the Suppliant for the entire Shire of Kelminster. A small shire, true, but the guidance of three million souls to the Tree will be in my hands."

Joe gave her a disgusted look. "Won't they do just as well without you?"

She laughed, relaxed for an instant to become a gay dark-haired girl. "Oh—probably. But I'm forced to keep up

appearances."

"The trouble is that after awhile you'll start believing all that stuff."

She said nothing for a moment. Then, mischievously, "Why are you looking about so attentively? Is this corridor so interesting then?"

"I'm watching for that devil Manaolo," said Joe. "It would be just like him to be lurking in one of these shadows and step out and stab me."

Elfane shook her head. "Manaolo has gone down to Tier Three. He has tried to make me his lover every night of the voyage but I have no desire for him. This morning he threatened that unless I yielded he would debauch himself along the Tier. I told him by all means to do so and then perhaps his virility would not be so ardently directed against me. He left in a huff."

"Manaolo always seems to be in a state of offended dignity."

"He is a man with a very exalted rank," said Elfane. "Now let us go down here. I wish to—"

Joe took her arm, swung her around, gazed into her startled eyes, her nose an inch from his.

"Look here, young lady. I'm not trying to assert my virility but I'm not trotting here and there after you, carrying your bundles like a chauffeur."

He knew it was the wrong word.

"Chauffeur, *ha!* Then—"

"If you don't like my company," said Joe, "now's the time to leave."

After a moment she said, "What's your name beside Smith?"

"Call me Joe."

"Joe—you're a very remarkable man. Very strange. You puzzle me, Joe."

"If you want to come with me—a chauffeur, a mechanic, a civil engineer, a moss-planter, a bar-tender, a tennis instructor, a freight docker, a dozen other things—we're going down to the Nineteen Gardens and see if they sell Earth-style beer."

The Nineteen Gardens occupied a slice through the middle of the construction—nineteen wedge-shaped sections sur-

rounding a central platform which served as a restaurant.

They found a vacant table and, to Joe's surprise, beer in frosted quart beakers was set before them without comment.

"If it pleases your Divinity," said Elfane meekly.

Joe grinned sheepishly. "You don't need to carry it that far. It must be a Druid trait, an avalanche one way, another way, all the way. Well, what did you want?"

"Nothing." She turned in her seat, looked out across the gardens. At this point Joe realized that willy-nilly, for good or bad, he was wildly enamored. Margaret? He sighed. She was far away, a thousand light-years.

He looked across the gardens, nineteen of them, flora of nineteen different planets, each with its distinctive color timbres—black, gray and white of Kelce—oranges, yellows, hot lime green of Zarjus—the soft pastel pink, green, blue and yellow blossoms which grew on the quiet little planets of Jonapah—green in a hundred rich tones, gay red, sky blue—Joe started, half-rose to his feet.

"What's the matter?" asked Elfane.

"That garden there—those are Earth plants or I'm a ring-tailed monkey." He jumped up, went to the rail and she followed. "Geraniums, honeysuckle, petunias, zinnia, roses, Italian cypress, poplars, weeping willows. And a lawn. And hibiscus . . ." He looked at the descriptive placque. "Planet Gea. Location uncertain."

They returned to the table. "You act as if you're homesick," said Elfane in an injured voice.

Joe smiled. "I am—very homesick. Tell me something about Ballenkarch."

SHE tasted the beer, looked at it in surprise, screwed up her face.

"Nobody likes beer when they first drink it," said Joe.

"Well—I don't know too much about Ballenkarch. Up to a few years ago it

was completely savage. No ships stopped there because the autochthones were cannibals. Then the present prince united all of the smaller continent into a nation. It happened overnight. Many people were killed.

"But now there is no more murder and ships can land in comparative safety. The Prince has decided to industrialize and he's imported much machinery from Belan, Mangtse, and Grabo across the stream. Little by little he's extending his rule over the main continent—winning over the chiefs, hypnotizing them or killing them.

"Now you must understand the Ballenkarts have no religion whatever and we Druids hope to tie their new industrial power to us through the medium of a common faith. Then we will no longer depend on Mangtse for manufactured goods. The Mangs naturally don't care for the idea and so they are . . ." Her eyes widened. She reached across, grasped his arm. "Manaolo! Oh Joe, I hope he doesn't see us."

Joe's mantle of caution ripped. Humility is impossible when the object of your love is fearing for your safety.

He sat back in his seat, watched Manaolo come striding onto the terrace like a Demonland hero. A beige-skinned woman, wearing orange pantaloons, pointed slippers of blue cloth and a blue cloth cap, hung on his arm. In his other arm he carried the parcel he had taken off the ship. In the flicker of his dead eyes he saw Elfane and Joe, changed his course without expression, sauntered across the floor, casually drawing a stiletto from his belt.

"This is it," muttered Joe. "This is it!" He rose to his feet.

Diners, drinkers, scattered. Manaolo stopped a yard distant, the ghost of a smile on his dark face. He set the parcel on the table, then easily stepped forward, thrust. It was done with an almost naive simplicity as if he expected Joe to stand still to be stabbed. Joe threw the beer into his face, hit his wrist with the beaker and the stiletto

tinkled to the ground.

"Now," said Joe, "I'm going to beat you within an inch of your life."

* * * * *

Manaolo lay on the ground. Joe, panting, straddled him. The bandage across his nose had broken. Blood flowed down his face, down his chin. Manaolo's hand fell on the stiletto. With a subdued grunt he swung. Joe gripped the arm, guided it past him into Manaolo's shoulder.

Manaolo grunted once more, plucked the blade loose. Joe seized it away, stuck it through Manaolo's ear into the wooden floor, pounded it deep with blows of his fist, jumped to his feet, stood looking down.

Manaolo flopped like a fish, lay still, exhausted. An impassive litter crew came through the crowd, removed the stiletto, loaded him on the litter, bore him away. The beige-skinned woman ran along beside him. Manaolo spoke to her. She turned, ran to the table, took the parcel, ran back to where the attendants were loading Manaolo into a wheeled vehicle, placed the parcel on his chest.

Joe sank back into his chair, took Elfane's beer, drank deeply.

"Joe," she whispered. "Are you—hurt?"

"I'm black and blue all over," said Joe. "Manaolo's a rough boy. If you hadn't been here I would have ducked him. But," he said with a blood-smear grin, "I couldn't let you see me ducking my rival."

"Rival?" she looked puzzled. "Rival?"

"For you."

"Oh!" in a colorless tone.

"Now don't say 'I'm the Royal Druid God-almighty priestess!'"

She looked up startled. "I wasn't thinking of that. I was thinking that Manaolo never was—your rival."

Joe said, "I've got to clean up and get some new clothes. Would you like to come with me or—"

"No," said Elfane, still in the colorless voice. "I'll stay here awhile. I want to—to think."

THIRTY-ONE hours. The *Belsaurion* was due to take off. The passengers trickled back on board to be checked in by the purser.

Thirty-one and a half hours. "Where's Manaolo?" Elfane asked the purser. "Has he come aboard?"

"No, Worship."

Elfane chewed her lip, clenched her hands. "I'd better check at the hospital. You won't go off without me?"

"No, Worship, certainly not."

Joe followed her to a telephone. "Hospital," she said to the mechanical voice. Then, "I want to inquire about Ecclesiarch Manaolo, who was brought in yesterday. Has he been discharged? . . . Very well but hurry. His ship is waiting to take off . . ." She turned a side comment to Joe. "They've gone to check at his room."

A moment passed; then she bent to the ear-phone. "*What!* No!"

"What's the trouble?"

"He's dead. He's been murdered."

The captain agreed to hold the ship until Elfane returned from the hospital. She ran to the elevator with Joe at her heels. In the hospital she was led to a lank Beland nurse with white hair wound into a severe bun.

"Are you his wife?" asked the nurse. "If so will you please make the arrangements for the body."

"I'm not his wife. I don't care what you do with the body. Tell me, what became of the parcel he brought in here with him?"

"There's no parcel in his room. I remember he brought one in with him—but it's not there now."

Joe asked, "What visitors did he have?"

"I'm not sure. I could find out, I suppose."

Manaolo's last visitors were three Mangs, who had signed unfamiliar names to the register. The corridor at-

tendant had noticed that one of them, an elderly man with a rigid military posture, had emerged from the room carrying a parcel.

Elfane leaned against Joe's shoulder. "That was the pot with the plant in it." He put his arms around her, patted her dark head. "And now the Mangs have it," she said hopelessly.

"Excuse me if I'm excessively curious," said Joe. "But what is there in that pot which makes it so important?"

She looked at him tearfully, finally said, "The second most important living thing in the universe. The only living shoot from the Tree of Life."

They slowly returned along the blue-tiled corridor toward the ship. Joe said, "I'm not only curious but I'm stupid as well. Why bother to carry a shoot from the Tree of Life all over creation? Unless, of course—"

She nodded. "As I told you we wished to form a bond with the Ballenkarts—a religious bond. This shoot, the Son of the Tree, would be the vital symbol."

"Then," said Joe, "the Druids would gradually infiltrate, gradually dominate, until Ballenkarch was another Kyril. Five billion miserable serfs, a million or two high-living Druids, one Tree." He examined her critically. "Aren't there any on Kyril who consider the system—well, unbalanced?"

She burnt him with an indignant look. "You're a complete Materialist. On Kyril Materialism is an offense punishable by death."

"Materialism' meaning 'distribution of the profits,'" suggested Joe. "Or maybe 'incitement to rebellion.'"

"Life is a threshold to glory," said Elfane. "Life is the effort which determines one's place on the Tree. The industrious workers become leaves high in the Scintillance. The sluggard must grope forever through dark slime as a rootlet."

"If Materialism is the sin you seem to believe it is—why do the Druids eat so high off the hog? Which means, live in such pampered luxury? Doesn't it

seem strange to you that those who stand to lose the most by 'Materialism' are those most opposed to it?"

"Who are you to criticize?" she cried angrily. "A barbarian as savage as the Ballenkarts! If you were on Kyril your wild talk would quickly be shut off!"

"Still the tin goddess, aren't you?" said Joe contemptuously.

IN outraged silence she stalked ahead. Joe grinned to himself, followed her back to the ship.

The lock into the ship opened. Elfane stopped short. "The Son is lost—probably destroyed." She looked sidewise at Joe. "There is no reason why I should continue to Ballenkarch. My duty is to return home, report to the College of Thearchs."

Joe rubbed his chin ruefully. He had been hoping that this aspect to the matter would not occur to her. He said tentatively, not quite sure how much anger she felt toward him, "But you left Kyril with Manaolo to escape the life of the palace. The Thearchs will learn every detail of Manaolo's death through their spies."

She inspected him with an expression unreadable to his Earthly perceptions. "You want me to continue with you?"

"Yes, I do."

"Why?"

"I'm afraid," said Joe with a sad droop to his mouth, "that you affect me very intensely, very pleasantly. This in spite of your warped philosophy."

"That was the right answer," announced Elfane. "Very well, I will continue. Perhaps," she said importantly, "perhaps I'll be able to persuade the Ballenkarts to worship the Tree on Kyril."

Joe held his breath for fear of laughing and so offending her once more. She looked at him somberly. "I realize you find me amusing."

Hableyat stood by the purser's desk. "Ah—back, I see. And Manaolo's assassins have escaped with the Son of the Tree?"

Elfane froze in her tracks. "How did you know?"

"My dear Priestess," said Hableyat, "the smallest pebble dropped in the pond sends its ripple to the far shore. Indeed, I see that I am perhaps even closer to the true state of affairs than you are."

"What do you mean by that?"

The port clanged, the steward politely said, "We take off in ten minutes. Priestess, my Lords, may I web you into your berths against the climb into speed?"

IX

JOE awoke from his trance. Remembering the last awakening he jerked up in his web, searched the cabin. But he was alone and the door was locked, bolted, barred as he had arranged it before taking the pill and turning hypnotic patterns on the screen.

Joe jumped out of the hammock, bathed, shaved, climbed into the new suit of blue gabardine he had bought at Junction. Stepping out on the balcony, he found the saloon almost dark. Evidently he had awakened early.

He stopped by the door to Cabin 13, thought of Elfane lying warm and limp within, her dark hair tumbled on the pillow, her face, smoothed of doubts and prideful mannerisms. He put his hand to the door. It was as if something dragged it there. By an effort of will he pulled the arm back, turned, moved along the balcony. He stopped short. Someone sat in the big lounge by the observation port. Joe leaned forward, squinted into the gloom. Hableyat.

Joe continued along the balcony, down the steps. Hableyat made a courtly gesture of greeting. "Sit down, my friend, and join me in my pre-prandial contemplations."

Joe took a seat. "You awoke early."

"To the contrary," said Hableyat. "I did not submit to slumber. I have been sitting here in this lounge six hours and you are the first person I have seen."

"Whom were you expecting?"

Hableyat allowed a wise expression to form on his yellow face. "I expected no one *in particular*. But from a few adroit questions and interviews at the Junction I find that people are not all they seem. I was curious to observe any activity in the light of this new knowledge."

Joe said with a sigh, "After all, it's none of *my* business."

Hableyat wagged his plump forefinger. "No, no, my friend. You are modest. You dissemble. I fear that you have become very much engrossed in the fortunes of the lovely young Priestess and so cannot be considered dispassionate."

"Put it this way. I don't care whether or not the Druids get their plant life to Ballenkarch. And I don't quite understand why you are so co-operative toward their efforts." He glanced at Hableyat appraisingly. "If I were the Druids I'd reconsider the whole idea."

"Ah, my dear fellow," beamed Hableyat, "you compliment me. But I work in the dark. I grope. There are subtleties I have not yet fathomed. It would surprise you to learn the duplicity of some of our acquaintances."

"Well, I'm willing to be surprised."

"For instance—that bald old woman in the black dress, who sits and stares into space like one already dead, what do you think of her?"

"Oh—harmless unprepossessing old buzzard."

"She is four hundred and twelve years old. Her husband, according to my informant, evolved an elixir of life when she was fourteen. She murdered him and only twenty years ago did she lose the freshness of her youth. During this time she has had lovers numbered by the thousands, of all shapes, sizes, sexes, races, bloods and colors. For the last hundred years her diet has consisted almost entirely of human blood."

Joe sank into the seat, rubbed his face. "Go on."

"I learn that one of my countrymen is

a great deal higher in rank and authority than I had assumed, and that I must tread warily indeed. I find that the Prince of Ballenkarch, has an agent aboard the ship."

"Continue," said Joe.

"I learned also—as perhaps I hinted before the take-off from Junction—that Manaolo's death and the loss of his flowerpot was perhaps not an unrelieved tragedy from the Druid standpoint."

"How so?"

HABLEYAT looked thoughtfully up along the balcony. "Has it ever occurred to you," he asked slowly, "that Manaolo was an odd choice for courier on a mission of such importance?"

Joe frowned. "I rather imagined that he fell into the commission through his rank—which, according to Elfane, is—was—rather exalted. An Ecclesiarch, right under a Thearch."

"But the Druids are not completely inflexible and stupid," said Hableyat patiently. "They have managed to control five billion men and women with nothing more than a monstrous tree for almost a thousand years. They are not dolts."

"The College of Thearchs no doubt knew Manaolo for what he was—a swaggering egocentric. They decided that he would make the ideal stalking-horse. I, not understanding the intricacy of the plan, decided that Manaolo in turn needed a decoy to divert attention from him. For this purpose I selected you."

"But the Druids had foreseen the difficulty in the mission, and had made arrangements. Manaolo was sent out with a spurious seedling with exactly the right degree of ostentatious stealth. The real Son of the Tree was conveyed in another manner."

"And this other manner?"

Hableyat shrugged. "I can only theorize. Perhaps the Priestess has it cunningly concealed about her person. Perhaps the shoot has been entrusted to the baggage car—though this I doubt

through fear of our spies. I imagine the shoot is in the custody of some representative of Kyril. . . . Perhaps on this ship, perhaps on another."

"And so?"

"And so I sit here and watch to see if anyone shares my suspicion. So far you are the first to appear."

Joe smiled faintly. "And what conclusions do you draw?"

"None."

The white-haired steward appeared, his legs and arms thin and peculiarly graceful in the skin-tight cloth. Cloth? Joe, for the first time, looked closely. The steward asked, "Will you gentlemen take breakfast?"

Hableyat nodded. "I will."

Joe said, "I'll have some fruit." Then emboldened by his discovery of beer at Junction, "I don't suppose you have coffee."

"I think we can find some, Lord Smith."

Joe turned to Hableyat. "They don't wear many clothes. That's *paint* on them!"

Hableyat appeared to be amused. "Of course. Haven't you always known that the Belands wore more paint than clothes?"

"No, said Joe. "Clothes I've always taken for granted."

"That's a grave mistake," said Hableyat pompously. "When you're dealing with any creature or manifestation or personality on a strange planet—*never take anything for granted!* When I was young I visited the world Xenchoy on the Kim and there I made the mistake of seducing one of the native girls. A delicious creature with vines plaited into her hair. I remember that she submitted readily but without enthusiasm."

"In my most helpless moment she attempted to stab me with a long knife. I protested and she was dumbfounded. Subsequently I found that on Xenchoy only a person intending suicide will possess a girl out of wedlock and since there is no onus either on suicide or impudicity he so achieves humanity's

dream, of dying in ecstasy."

"And the moral?"

"It is certainly clear. Things are not always what they seem."

Joe relaxed into the couch, musing, while Hableyat hummed a four-toned Mang fugue under his breath, accompanying himself on six tablets hanging around his neck like a pendant, each of which vibrated to a different note when touched.

Joe thought, *It's evident he either knows or suspects something which is plain as my face and I can't see it. Hableyat once said I have a limited intellect, maybe he's right. He's certainly given me enough hints. Elfane? Hableyat himself? No, he was talking around the Son of the Tree. A tremendous lot of excitement for a vegetable. Hableyat thinks it's still aboard, that's clear. Well, I haven't got it. He doesn't have it or he wouldn't talk so much. Elfane is in the dark. The Cils? The horrible old woman? The Mangs? The two Druid missionaries?*

Hableyat was observing him closely. As Joe sat up with a jerk Hableyat smiled. "Now do you understand?"

Joe said, "It seems reasonable."

THE rating of passengers once more sat in the saloon but there was a different atmosphere now. The first leg of the voyage had suffered from tenseness but it had been a loose unpleasantness, a matter of personal likes and dislikes, dominated perhaps by the personality of Manaolo.

Now the individual relationships seemed submerged in more sweeping racial hatreds. Erru Kametin, the two Mang civilians—proctors of the Red-branch policy committee, so Joe learned from Hableyat—and the young Mang widow sat by the hour, playing their game with the colored bars, darting hot glances across the room at the imper-turbable Hableyat.

The two Druid missionaries huddled over their altar in a dark corner of the saloon, busy with interminable rites be-

fore the representation of the Tree. The Cils, injured by the lack of response to their silken gambolings, kept to the promenade. The black-gowned woman sat still as death, her eyes moving an eighth of an inch from time to time. Perhaps once an hour she lifted a transparent hand up to her glass-bald pate.

Joe found himself buffeted by psychological cross-currents, like a pond thrashed by winds from every direction at once. First there was his own mission to Ballenkarch. Strange, thought Joe—only days, hours, to Ballenkarch and now his errand seemed drained of all urgency. He had only a given limited amount of emotion, of will, of power, and he seemed to have invested a large part of it in Elfane. Invested? It had been torn out of him, squeezed, wrenched.

Joe thought of Kyril, of the Tree. The palaces at Divinal clustered around the sub-planetary bulk of the trunk, the endless reaches of meager farms and ill-smelling villages, the slack-shouldered dead-eyed pilgrimage into the trunk, with the last triumphant gesture, the backward look off over the flat gray landscape.

He thought of Druid discipline—death. Though death was nothing to be feared on Kyril. Death was as common as eating. The Druid solution to any quandary—the avalanche—the all-the-way approach to existence. Moderation was a word with little meaning to men and women with no curb to any whim, indulgence or excess.

He considered what he knew of Mangtse—a small world of lakes and landscaped islands, a people with a love of intricate convolution, with an architecture of fanciful curves, looping wooden bridges over the streams and canals, charming picturesque vistas in the antique yellow light of the dim little sun.

Then the factories—neat, efficient, systematic, on the industrial islands. And the Mangs—a people as ornate, involute and subtle as their carved bridges.

There was Hableyat, into whose soul Joe had seen for never an instant. There were the fire-breathing Redbranches bent on imperialism. In Earth terms—medievalists.

And Ballenkarch? Nothing except that it was a barbaric world with a prince intent on bringing an industrial complex into existence overnight. And somewhere on the planet, among the savages of the south or the barbarians of the north, was Harry Creath.

Harry had captured Margaret's imagination and taken light-hearted leave, leaving behind an emotional turmoil which could not be settled till Harry returned. Two years ago Harry had been only hours away on Mars. But when Joe arrived to bring him back to Earth for a showdown, Harry had left. Fuming at the delay, but tenacious and full of his obsession, Joe had persisted.

On Thuban he had lost the trail when a drunk's cutlass sent him to the hospital for three months. Then further months of agonized search and inquiry and at last the name of an obscure planet came to the surface—Ballenkarch. Then further months of working his way across the intervening galaxy. Now Ballenkarch lay ahead and somewhere on the planet was Harry Creath.

And Joe thought, *To hell with Harry!* Because Margaret was no longer at the focus of his mind. Now it was an unprincipled minx of a Priestess. Joe pictured himself and Elfane exploring Earth's ancient playgrounds—Paris, Vienna, San Francisco, the Vale of Kashmir, the Black Forest, the Sahara Sea.

Then he asked himself, would Elfane fit? There were no dazed drudges on Earth to be killed or beaten or pampered like animals. Maybe there was Hableyat's meaning—*Things are not always what they seem*. Elfane appeared—fundamentally—a creature of his own general pattern. Perhaps he had never quite understood the profundity of Druid egotism. Very well then, he'd find out.

Hableyat looked up blandly as Joe got

to his feet. "If I were you, my friend, I think I would wait. At least another day. I doubt if as yet she has completely appreciated her own loneliness. I think that your appearance now, especially with that belligerent scowl on your face, would merely arouse her antagonism and she would class you with the rest of her enemies. Let her stew a day or so longer and then let her come upon you in the promenade—or the gymnasium, where I observe she spends an hour every day."

Joe sank back on the couch. He said, "Hableyat, you mystify me."

Hableyat shook his head sadly. "Ah, but I am transparent."

"First, on Kyril, you save my life. Then you try to get me killed."

"Only as a disagreeable necessity."

"At times I think you're friendly, sympathetic—"

"But of course!"

"—just as now you read my mind and give me fatherly advice. But—I'm never quite sure just what you're saving me for. Just as the goose being fattened for *pâté de fois gras* never understands the unstinting generosity of his master. Things aren't always what they seem." He laughed shortly. "I don't suppose you'll tell me what slaughter you're fattening me for?"

Hableyat performed a gesture of polite confusion. "Actually I am not at all devious. I make no pretenses, screen myself with nothing but honesty. My regard for you is genuine—but, I agree, that regard does not prevent me from sacrificing you for a greater end. There is no contradiction. I separate my personal tastes and aversions from my work. And so you know all about me."

"How do I know when you're working and when you're not?"

Hableyat threw out his hands. "It is a question not even I can answer."

But Joe was not entirely dissatisfied. He sat back in the couch and Hableyat relaxed the band around his plump midriff.

"Life is very difficult at times," said

Hableyat, "and very improbable, very taxing."

"Hableyat," said Joe, "why don't you come back with me to Earth?"

Hableyat smiled. "I may well heed your suggestion—if the Redbranches defeat the Bluewaters in the Ampianu."

X

FOUR days out from Junction, three days to Ballenkarch. Joe, leaning at the rail in the belly of the ship's promenade, heard a slow step along the composition. It was Elfane. Her face was pale and haunted, her eyes were large and bright. She stopped hesitantly beside Joe as if she were only pausing in her walk.

Joe said, "Hello," and looked back to the stars.

By some subtlety of pose Elfane gave him to understand that she had definitely stopped, that she had joined him. She said, "You've been avoiding me—when I need someone to talk to the most."

Joe said searchingly, "Elfane—have you ever been in love?"

Her face was puzzled. "I don't understand."

Joe grunted. "Just an Earth abstraction. Whom do you mate with on Kyril?"

"Oh—persons who interest us, whom we like to be with, who make us conscious of our bodies."

Joe turned back to the stars. "The subject is a little deep."

Her voice was amused and soft. "I understand very well, Joe."

He turned his head. She was smiling. Rich ripe lips, the passionate face, dark eyes holding an eagerness. He kissed her like a thirsty man drinking.

"Elfane . . . ?"

"Yes?"

"On Ballenkarch—we'll turn around, head back for Earth. No more worry, no more plotting, no more death. There's so many places I want to show you—old places, old Earth, that's still so fresh and sweet."

She moved in his arms. "There's my own world, Joe—and my responsibility."

Tensely Joe said, "On Earth you'll see it as it is—a vile muck, as degrading to the Druids as it is miserable to the slaves."

"Slaves? They serve the Tree of Life. We all serve the Tree of Life in our different ways."

"The Tree of Death!"

Elfane disengaged herself without heat. "Joe—it's something which I can't explain to you. We're bound to the Tree. We are its children. You don't understand the great truth. There is one universe, with the Tree at the hub, and the Druids and the Laity serve the Tree, at bay to pagan space.

"Someday it will be different. All men will serve the Tree. We'll be born from the soil, we'll serve and work and finally give our lives into the Tree and become a leaf in the eternal light, each to his place. Kyril will be the goal, the holy place of the galaxy."

Joe protested, "But you give this vegetable—an enormous vegetable but still a vegetable—you give this vegetable a higher place in your mind than you do humanity. On Earth we'd chop the thing up for stove wood. No, that's not true. We'd run a spiral runway around the thing, send excursion trips up and sell hot dogs and soda pop on the top. We'd use the thing, not let it hypnotize us by its bulk."

She had not heard him. "Joe—you can be my lover. And we'll live our life on Kyril and serve the Tree and kill its enemies. . . ." She stopped short, stunned by Joe's expression.

"That's no good—for either of us. I'll go back to Earth. You stay out here, find another lover to kill your enemies for you. And we'll each be doing what we want. But the other won't be included."

She turned away, leaned on the rail, stared dismally out at the midship stars. Presently, "Were you ever in love with any other woman?"

"Nothing serious," lied Joe. And, after

a moment, "And you—have you had other lovers?"

"Nothing serious . . ."

Joe looked at her sharply but there was no trace of humor on her face. He sighed. Earth was not Kyril.

She said, "After we land on Ballenkarch what will you do?"

"I don't know—I haven't made up my mind. Certainly nothing to do with Druids and Mangs, I know that much. Trees and empires can all explode together so far as I'm concerned. I have problems of my own . . ." His voice dwindled, died.

He saw himself meeting Harry Creath. On Mars, with his mind full of Margaret—on Io, Pluto, Altair, Vega, Giansar, Polaris, Thuban, even as recently as Jamivetta and Kyril—he had been conscious of nothing quixotic, nothing ridiculous in his voyaging .

Now Margaret's image had begun to blur—but blurred as it was he heard the tinkling chime of her laugh. With a sudden flush of embarrassment he knew that she would find a great deal of amusement in the tale of his venturings—as well as astonishment, incredulity and perhaps the faintest hint of scorn.

Elfane was regarding him curiously. He came back to the present. Strange, how solid and real she seemed in contrast to his thought-waifs. Elfane would find nothing amusing in a man roaming the universe for love of her. On the contrary she would be indignant if such were not the case.

"What will you do on Ballenkarch then?" she asked.

Joe rubbed his chin, stared out at the shifting stars. "I guess I'll look up Harry Creath."

"And where will you look for him?"

"I don't know. I'll try the civilized continent first."

"None of Ballenkarch is civilized."

"The least barbarian continent, then!" said Joe patiently. "If I know Harry, he'll be in the thick of things."

"And if he's dead?"

"Then I'll turn around and go home

with my conscience clear."

Margaret would say, "Harry dead?" And he saw the pert lift of her round chin. "In that case he loses by default. Take me, my chivalrous lover, sweep me away in your white space-boat."

He stole a glance at Elfane, became aware of a tart flowering incense she was wearing. Elfane was galvanic with life and thought and wonder. She took life and emotion seriously. Of course Margaret had a lighter touch, an easier laugh, was not intent on killing enemies of her religion. Religion? Joe laughed shortly. Margaret barely recognized the word.

"Why do you laugh?" Elfane asked suspiciously.

"I was thinking of an old friend," said Joe.

BALLENKARCH! A world of fierce gray storms and bright sunlight. A world of blazing color and violent landscape—of rock palisades like walls across the sky—of forests, dim, tall, sequestered—of savannahs ankle-deep in the greenest of grass, coursed by slow mighty rivers. In the low latitudes jungles crowded and jostled, trod under the weaker growths, built up mile after mile of humus until at last the elevation so created acted as a brake on their vitality.

And among the mountain passes, through the forests, wandering across the plains, rolled the Ballenkarch clans in caravans of brightly-painted wains. They were great bull-voiced men in armor of steel and leather, wasting their blood in vendetta and duel.

They lived in an atmosphere of epic—of raids, massacres, fights with tall black jungle bipeds, fearsome and semi-intelligent. For weapons they used swords, lances, a portable arbalest which flung fist-size stones. Their language, divorced from the current of galactic civilization a thousand years, was a barely understandable pidgin and they wrote in pictographs.

The *Belsaurion* sat down on a green

plain drenched in sunlight. In the distance rain hung in veils from a black welter of clouds and a gorgeous rainbow arched over a forest of tall blue-green trees.

A rude pavilion of logs and corrugated metal served as depot and waiting room and when the *Belsaurion* finally shuddered to rest a little wagon with eight creaking wheels came chugging out across the grass, stopped alongside the ship.

Joe asked Hableyat, "Where is the city?"

Hableyat chuckled. "The Prince won't allow a ship any closer to his main settlements for fear of slavers." These burly Ballenkarts are much in demand on Frums and Perkins for bodyguards."

The port was opened to the outdoors. Fresh air, smelling of damp earth, swept into the ship. The steward announced to the saloon, "Passengers wishing to alight may do so. You are cautioned not to leave the vicinity of the ship until transportation has been arranged to Vail-Alan."

Joe looked around for Elfane. She was speaking vehemently to the two Druid missionaries and they listened with expressions of mulish obstinacy. Elfane became enraged, jerked away, marched white-faced to the port and outside. The Druids followed, muttering to each other.

Elfane approached the driver of the eight-wheeled vehicle. "I wish to be conveyed to Vail-Alan at once."

He looked at her without expression. Hableyat touched her elbow. "Priestess, an air car shortly will arrive to convey us a great deal faster than this vehicle."

She turned, walked swiftly away. Hableyat leaned close to the driver, who whispered a few sentences. Hableyat's face changed in the slightest degree—a twitch of a muscle, a deepening of his jowl-crease. He saw Joe watching, instantly became businesslike and the driver was once more blank-faced.

Hableyat moved off by himself in a preoccupied manner. Joe joined him.

"Well" — sardonically — "what's the news?"

Hableyat said, "Very bad—very bad indeed—"

"How so?"

Hableyat hesitated an instant, then blurted in as frank an exhibition of emotion as Joe had seen him express, "My opponents at home are much stronger with the Lathbon than I knew. Magnerru Ippolito himself is at Vail-Alan. He has reached the Prince and evidently has uttered some unsavory truths regarding the Druids. So now I learn that plans for a Druid cathedral and monastery have been abandoned and that Wanbrion, a Sub-Thearch, is guarded closely."

In exasperation Joe surveyed the portly Hableyat. "Well, isn't that what you want? Certainly a Druid advising the Prince wouldn't help the Mangs."

Hableyat shook his head sadly. "My friend, you are as easily gulled as my militant countrymen."

"I suppose I'm dense."

Hableyat held his hands out from his sides as if revealing all to Joe by the gesture. "It's so obvious."

"Sorry."

"In this manner—the Druids plan to assimilate Ballenkarch to themselves. My opponents on Mangtse, learning of this intent, rush forward to oppose it tooth and nail. They will not consider implications, probable eventualities. No, since it is a Druid scheme it must be countered. And with a program which, in my opinion, will seriously embarrass Mangtse."

"I see what you're driving at," said Joe, "but not how it works."

HABLEYAT faced him with an amused expression. "My dear fellow, human reverence is by no means infinite. I would say that the Kyril Laity lavish the maximum on their Tree. So—what will be the reaction to news of another divine Tree?"

Joe grinned. "It will cut their reverence toward the first tree in half."

"Naturally I am unable to estimate the diminution but in any event it will be considerable. Doubt, heresy, will find ears and the Druids will notice that the Laity is no longer unquestioning and innocent. They identify themselves now with the Tree. It is theirs, unique of its kind, solitary in the universe.

"Then—suddenly another Tree exists on Ballenkarch—planted by the Druids and there are rumors that its presence is politically motivated." He raised his eyebrows expressively.

"But the Druids, by controlling Ballenkarch and these new industries, can still wind up on the credit side."

Hableyat shook his head. "My friend, Mangtse is potentially the weakest world of the three. That's the crux of the entire matter. Kyril has its manpower, Ballenkarch has the mineral and agricultural wealth, an aggressive population, a warlike tradition. In any association of worlds Ballenkarch eventually will be the cannibal mate devouring his spouse.

"Think of the Druids—the epicures, the sophisticated masters of five billion slaves. Picture them trying to dominate Ballenkarch. It is laughable. In fifty years the Ballenkarts would be whipping the Thearchs from the gates of Divinal and burning the Tree for a victory bonfire.

"Consider the alternative—Ballenkarch tied to Mangtse. A period of tribulation, profit for none. And now the Druids will have no choice—they will have to buckle down and work. With the Ballenkart industries denied them they will of necessity bring new ways to Kyril—factories, industries, education. The old ways will go.

"The Druids might or might not lose the reins of power—but Kyril would remain an integrated industrial unit and there would go the natural market for Mang products. So you see, with the Kyril and Ballenkarch markets both removed our own Mang economy would dwindle, suffer. We would be forced to recover our markets by military

action and we might lose."

"I understand all this," said Joe slowly, "but it gets nowhere. Just what do you want?"

"Ballenkarch is self-sufficient. At the moment neither Mangtse nor Kyril can exist alone. We form a natural couple. But as you see the Druids are dissatisfied with the influx of wealth. They demand more and they think to acquire it by controlling the Ballenkarch industries.

"I want to prevent this—and I also want to prevent a Mangtse-Ballenkarch understanding, which would be *prima facie* unnatural. I wish to see a new regime on Kyril, a government committed to improving the productive and purchasing power of the Laity, a government committed to the natural alliance with Mangtse.

"Too bad the three worlds can't form a common council."

Hableyat sighed. "That idea, while felicitous, flies in the face of three realities. First, the current policy of the Druids—second, the ascendancy of the Redbranch on Mangtse—and third, the ambitions of the Prince of Ballenkarch. Change all three of these realities and such a union might be consummated. I for one would approve it—why not?" he mused as if to himself and behind the bland yellow mask Joe glimpsed the face of a very tired man.

"What will happen to you now?"

Halbeyat pursed his lips dolefully. "If my authority actually has been superseded I will be expected to kill myself. Don't look bewildered—it is a Mang custom, a method of underscoring disapproval. I fear I am not long for the world."

"Why not return to Mangtse and repair your political fences?"

Hableyat shook his head. "That is not our custom. You may smile but you forget that societies exist through general agreement as to certain symbols, necessities which must be obeyed."

"Here comes the air-car," said Joe. "If I were you, instead of committing suicide, I'd try to work out some kind

of scheme to get the Prince on your side. He seems to be the key. They're both after him, Druids and Mangs."

Hableyat shook his head. "Not the Prince. He's a queer man, a mixture of bandit, jester and visionary. He seems to regard this new Ballenkarch as an interesting game, a sportive recreation."

XI

THE air-car landed, a big-bellied transport in need of paint. Two large men in red knee-length breeches, loose blue jackets, black caps, swaggered from the air-car, wearing the placidly arrogant expressions of a miliary élite.

"Lord Prince sends his greetings," said the first to the Beland officer. "He understands that there are foreign agents among the passengers, so he will have all who land conveyed before him at once."

There was no further conversation. Into the car trooped Elfane and Hableyat, the two Druids clutching their portable altar, the Mangs, glaring yellow-eyed at Hableyat, and Joe. These were all for Ballenkarch—the Cils and the aged woman in the black gown would continue their journey to Castelgran, Cil or Beland and none were discharged from the hold.

Joe crossed the fuselage, dropped into a seat beside Elfane. She turned her head, showed him a face which seemed drained of its youth. "What do you want with me?"

"Nothing. Are you angry with me?"

"You're a Mang spy."

Joe laughed uneasily. "Oh—because I'm thick with Hableyat?"

"What did he send you to tell me now?"

The question took Joe aback. It opened up a vista for speculation. Could it be possible that Hableyat was using him as a means to convey ideas of Hableyat's choosing to the Druids through Elfane?

He said, "I don't know whether or not he wanted this to reach you. But he

explained to me why he's been helping you bring your tree here and it sounds convincing to me."

"In the first place," said Elfane scathingly. "We have no more tree. It was stolen from us at Junction." Her eyes widened and she looked at him with a sudden suspicion. "Was that your doing too? Is it possible that . . ."

Joe sighed. "You're determined to think the worst of me. Very well. If you weren't so damned beautiful and appealing I wouldn't think twice about you. But you're planning to bust in on the Prince with your two milk-faced Druids and you think you can wind him around your finger. Maybe you can. I know very well you'd stop at nothing. And now I'll get off my chest what Hableyat said and you can do what you like with the information."

He glared at her, challenging her to speak, but she tossed her head and stared hard out the window.

"He believes that if you succeed in this mission, then you and your Druids will wind up playing second fiddle to these tough Ballenkarts. If you don't succeed—well, the Mangs will probably figure out something unpleasant for you personally but the Druids—according to Hableyat—eventually will come out ahead."

"Go away," she said in a choked voice. "All you do is scare me. Go away."

"Elfane—forget all this Druid-Mang-Tree-of-Life stuff and I'll take you back to Earth. That is if I get off the planet alive."

She showed him the back of her head. The car buzzed, vibrated, rose into the air. The landscape dished out below them. Massive mountains shot and marbled with snow and ice, luxuriant meadowland with grass glowing the sharp bright color of prismatic green, spread below. They crossed the range. The car jerked, jolted in bumpy air, slanted down toward an inland sea.

A settlement, obviously raw and new, had grown up on the shore of this sea. Three heavy docks, a dozen large rec-

tangular buildings—glass-sided, roofed with bright metal—formed the heart of the town. A mile beyond a promontory covered with trees overlooked the sea and in the shadow of this promontory the car grounded.

The door opened. One of the Ballenkarts motioned brusquely. "This way."

Joe followed Elfane to the ground and saw ahead a long low building with a glass front looking across the vista of sea and plain. The Ballenkart corporal made another peremptory motion. "To the Residence," he said curtly.

Resentfully Joe started for the building, thinking that these soldiers made poor emissaries of good will. His nerves tautened as he walked. The atmosphere was hardly one of welcome. The tension, he noticed, gripped everyone. Elfane moved as if her legs were rigid. Erru Kametin's jaw shone bright yellow along the bone line.

AT the rear Joe noticed Hableyat speaking urgently with the two Druid missionaries. They seemed reluctant. Hableyat raised his voice. Joe heard him say, "What's the difference? This way you at least have a chance, whether you distrust my motives or not." The Druids at last appeared to acquiesce. Hableyat marched briskly ahead and said in a loud voice, "Halt! This impudence must not go on!"

The two Ballenkarts swung around in amazement. With a stern face Hableyat said, "Go, get your master. We will suffer this indignity no longer."

The Ballenkarts blinked, slightly crestfallen to find their authority questioned. Erru Kametin eyes snapping, said, "What are you saying, Hableyat? Are you trying to compromise us in the eyes of the Prince?"

Hableyat said, "He must learn that we Mangs prize our dignities. We will not stir from this ground until he advances to greet us in the manner of a courteous host."

Erru Kametin laughed scornfully. "Stay then." He flung his scarlet cloak

about him, turned, proceeded toward the Residence. The Ballenkarts conferred and one accompanied the Mangs. The other eyed Hableyat with truculent eyes. "Wait until the Prince hears of this!"

The rest had rounded a corner. Hableyat leisurely drew his hand from his cloak, discharged a tube at the guard. The guard's eyes became milky, he tumbled to the ground.

"He's merely stunned," said Hableyat to Joe, who had turned protestingly. To the Druids, "Hurry."

Lifting their robes they ran to a nearby bank of soft dirt. One dug a hole with a stick, the other opened the altar, tenderly lifted out the miniature Tree. A small pot surrounded its roots.

Joe heard Elfane gasp. "You two—"

"Silence," rapped Halbeyat. "Attend your own concerns if you are wise. These are Arch-Thearchs, both of them."

"Manaolo—a dupe!"

Into the hole went the roots. Soil was patted firm. The Druids closed the altar, dusted off their hands, and once more became empty-faced monks. And the Son of the Tree stood firm in the ground of Ballenkarch, bathing in the hot yellow light. Unless one looked closely, it was merely another young shrub.

"Now," said Hableyat placidly, "we continue to the Residence."

Elfane glared at Hableyat and the Druids, her eyes flaming with rage and humiliation. "All this time you've been laughing at me!"

"No, no, Priestess," said Hableyat. "Calmness, I implore you. You'll need all your wits when you face the Prince. Believe me, you served a very useful function."

Elfane turned blindly as if to run off toward the sea but Joe caught hold of her. For a moment she stared into his eyes, her muscles like wire. Then she relaxed, grew limp. "Very well, I'll go in."

They continued, meeting halfway a squad of six soldiers evidently sent out to escort them in. No one heeded the

numb form of the guard.

At the portal they were subjected to a search, quick but so detailed and thorough as to evoke angry protests from the Druids and an outraged yelp from Elfane. The arsenal so discovered was surprising—hand-conics from each of the Druids, Hableyat's stun-tube and a collapsible dagger, Joe's gun, a little polished tube Elfane carried in her sleeve.

The corporal stood back, gestured. "You are permitted to enter the Residence. See that you observe the accepted forms of respect."

Passing through an antechamber painted with grotesque half-demoniac animals they entered a large hall. The ceiling beams were great timbers, hand-hewn and notched into a formalized pattern, the walls were surfaced with woven rattan. At either side banks of green and red plants lined the wall and the floor was covered by a soft rug of fiber woven and dyed in a striking pattern of scarlet, black and green.

Opposite the entrance was a dais, flanked by two heavy balustrades of rust-red wood, and a wide throne-like seat of the same russet wood. At the moment the throne was empty.

Twenty or thirty men stood about the room—large, suntanned, some with bristling mustaches—awkward and ill at ease as if unused to a roof over their heads. All wore red knee-length breeches. Some wore blouses of various colors while others were bare-chested with capes of black fur slung back from their shoulders. All bore short heavy sabers in their belts and all eyed the newcomers without friendliness.

Joe looked from face to face. Harry Creath would not be far from Vail-Alan, the center of activity. But he was not in the hall.

BESIDE the dais in a group stood the Redbranch Mangs. Erru Kametin spoke in a harsh staccato to the woman. The two proctors listened silently, half-turned away.

A house-marshal with a long brass clarion stepped into the room, blew a brilliant fanfare. Joe smiled faintly. Like a musical comedy—warriors in bright uniforms, pageantry, pomp, punctilio . . .

The fanfare again—*tantara-tantivy*—shrill, exciting.

"The Prince of Vail-Alan! Ruler-Preemptor across the face of Ballenkarch!"

A blond man, slight beside the Ballenkarts, stepped briskly up on the dais, seated himself on the throne. He had a round bony face with lines of humor around his mouth, nervous twitching hands, an air of gay intelligence, reckless impatience. From the crowd came a hoarse "*Aaaaah*" of reverence.

Joe nodded slowly without surprise. Who else?

Harry Creath flicked his eyes around the room. They rested on Joe, passed, swung back. For a minute he stared in amazement.

"Joe Smith! What in Heaven's name are you doing out here?"

This was the moment he had come a thousand light years for. And now Joe's mind refused to function correctly. He stuttered the words he had rehearsed for two years, through toil, danger, boredom—the words which expressed the two-year obsession—"I came out to get you."

He had said them, he was vindicated. The compulsion which was almost auto-suggestion had been allayed. But the words had been spoken and Harry's mobile face expressed astonishment. "Out here? All the way—to get me?"

"That's right."

"Get me to do what?" Harry leaned back and his wide mouth broke into a grin.

"Well—you left some unfinished business on Earth."

"None that I know of. You'd have to talk long and fast to get me in motion." He turned to a tall guard with a face like a rock. "Have these people been searched for weapons?"

"Yes, Prince."

Harry turned back to Joe with a grimace of jocular apology. "There's too many people interested in me. I can't ignore the obvious risks. Now, you were saying—you want me to go back to Earth. Why?"

Why? Joe asked himself the question. *Why?* Because Margaret thought herself in love with Harry and Joe thought she was in love with a dream. Because Joe thought that if Margaret could know Harry for a month, rather than for two days, if she could see him in day-to-day living, if she could recognize that love was not a series of lifts and thrills like a roller-coaster ride—that marriage was not a breathless round of escapades.

In short, if Margaret's pretty frivolous head could be rattled loose from its nonsense—then there would be room in it for Joe. Was that it? It had seemed easy, flying out to Mars for Harry only to find Harry had departed for Io. And from Io to Pluto, the Jumping-off Place. And then the compulsion began to take hold, the doggedness. Out from Pluto, on and on and on. Then Kyril, then Junction, now Ballenkarch.

Joe blushed, intensely aware of Elfane at his back, watching him with bright-eyed speculation. He opened his mouth to speak, closed it again. *Why?*

Eyes were on him, eyes from all over the room. Curious eyes, cold uninterested eyes, hostile eyes, searching eyes—Hableyat's placid, Elfane's probing, Harry Creath's mocking eyes. And into Joe's confused mind one hard fact emerged—he would be displaying himself as the most consummate ass in the history of the universe if he told the truth.

"Something to do with Margaret?" asked Harry mercilessly. "She send you out here?"

Joe saw Margaret as if in a vision, inspecting the two of them derisively. His eyes swung to Elfane. A hellion, obstinate, intolerant, too intense and full of life for her own good. But sincere and decent.

"Margaret?" Joe laughed. "No. Noth-

ing to do with Margaret. In fact I've changed my mind. Keep to hell away from Earth."

Harry relaxed slightly. "If it had to do with Margaret—why, you're rather outdated." He craned his neck. "Where the devil is she? *Margaret!*"

"Margaret?" muttered Joe.

She stepped up on the dais beside Harry. "Hello, Joe"—as if she'd taken leave of him yesterday afternoon—"what a nice surprise."

She was laughing inside, very quietly. Joe grinned also, grimly. Very well, he'd take his medicine. He met their eyes, said, "Congratulations." It occurred to him that Margaret was in sheer fact living the life she claimed she wanted to lead—excitement, intrigue, adventure. And it seemed to agree with her.

XII

HARRY had been speaking to him. Joe suddenly became aware of his voice. "—You see, Joe, this is a wonderful thing we're doing out here, a wonderful world. It's busting open with high-grade ore, timber, organic produce, manpower. I've got a picture in my mind, Joe—Utopia.

"There's a good bunch of lads behind me, and we're working together. They're a little rough yet but they see this world the way I see it and they're willing to take a chance on me. To begin with, of course, I had to knock a few heads together but they know who's boss now and we're getting on fine." Harry looked fondly over the crowd of Ballenkarts, any one of whom could have strangled him with one hand.

"In another twenty years," said Harry, "you won't believe your eyes. What we're going to do to the planet! It's marvelous, I tell you, Joe. Excuse me now, for a few minutes. There's affairs of state." He settled himself into his chair, looked from Mangs to Druids.

"We might as well talk it over now. I see it's all fresh and ripe in your

minds. There's my old friend Hableyat." He winked at Joe. "Foxy Grandpa. What's the occasion, Hableyat?"

Hableyat strutted forward. "Your Excellency, I find myself in a peculiar position. I have not communicated with my home government and I am not sure as to the extent of my authority."

Harry said to a guard. "Find the Magnerru." To Hableyat, "Magnerru Ippolito is fresh from Mangtse and he claims to speak with the voice of your Ampianu General."

From an archway to the side a Mang approached — a sturdy square-faced Mang with the brightest of black eyes, a lemon-yellow skin, bright orange lips. He wore a scarlet robe embroidered with a border of purple and green squares, a cubical black hat.

Erru Kametin and the other Mangs of his party bowed deeply, saluting with outflung arms. Hableyat nodded respectfully, a fixed smile on his plump lips.

"Magnerru," said Prince Harry, "Hableyat wants to know the extent of his freedom to make policy."

"None," rasped the Magnerru. "None whatever. Hableyat and the Bluewaters have been discredited in the Ampianu, the Lathbon sits with the Redbranch. Hableyat speaks with no voice but his own and it will soon be stilled."

Harry nodded. "Then it will be wise to hear, before his demise, what his views are."

"My Lord," said Hableyat, his face still frozen in its jovial mask, "my words are trivial. I prefer to hear the enunciations of the Magnerru and of the two Arch-Thearchs we have with us. My Lord, I may state that the highest of Kyril face you—Arch-Thearchs Oporeto Implan and Gameanza. They will ably present their views."

"My modest residence is thick with celebrities," said Harry.

Gameanza stepped forward with a glittering glance for the Magnerru. "Prince Harry, I consider the present atmosphere unsuited to discussion of

policy. Whenever the Prince desires—the sooner the better—I will communicate to him the trend of Druid policy together with my views in regard to the political and ethical situation."

The Magnerru said, "Talk to the dry-mouthed slug. Listen to his efforts to fix the slave system on Ballenkarch. Then send him back to his fetid gray world in the hold of a cattle ship."

Gameanza stiffened. His skin seemed to become brittle. He said to Harry in a sharp brassy voice. "I am at your pleasure."

Harry rose to his feet. "Very well, we'll retire for half an hour and discuss your proposals." He raised a hand to the Magnerru. "You'll have the same privilege, so be patient. Talk over old times with Hableyat. I understand he formerly occupied your position."

Arch-Thearch Gameanza followed him as he jumped from the dais and left the hall and after moved the Arch-Thearch Oporeto Implan. Margaret waved a casual hand to Joe. "See you later." She slipped away through another door.

Joe found a bench to the side of the room, wearily seated himself. Before him like a posed tableau stood the rigid Mangs, the exquisite wisp of flesh that was Elfane, Hableyat—suddenly gone vague and helpless—the Ballenkarts in their gorgeous costumes, troubled, confused, unused to the bickering of sharp wits, glancing uneasily at each other over heavy shoulders, muttering.

Elfane turned her head, gazed around the room. She saw Joe, hesitated, then crossed the floor, seated himself beside him. After a moment she said haughtily, "You're laughing at me—mocking me."

"I wasn't aware of it."

"You've found the man you were seeking," she said with eyebrows arched. "Why don't you do something?"

Joe shrugged. "I've changed my mind."

"Because that yellow-haired woman—Margaret—is here?"

"Partly."

"You never mentioned her to me."

"I had no idea you'd be interested."

ELFANE looked stonily across the audience hall. Joe said, "Do you know why I changed my mind?"

She shook her head. "No. I don't."

"It's because of you."

Elfane turned back with glowing eyes. "So it *was* the blond woman who brought you out here."

Joe sighed. "Every man can be a damn fool once in his life. At least once . . ."

She was not appeased. "Now, I suppose, if I sent you to look for someone you wouldn't go? That she meant more to you than I do?"

Joe groaned. "Oh Lord! In the first place you've never given me any reason to think that you—oh, hell!"

"I offered to let you be my lover."

Joe eyed her with exasperation. "I'd like to . . ." He recalled that Kyril was not Earth, that Elfane was a priestess, not a college girl.

Elfane laughed. "I understand you very well, Joe. On Earth men are accustomed to having their own way and the women are auxiliary inhabitants. And don't forget, Joe, you've never told me anything—that you loved me."

Joe growled, "I've been afraid to."

"Try me."

Joe tried and the happy knowledge came to him that, in spite of a thousand light-years and two extremes of culture, girls were girls, Priestesses or co-eds.

Harry and the Arch-Druid Gameanza returned to the room and a set expression hung like a frame on the Druid's white face. Harry said to the Magnerru, "Perhaps you will be good enough to exchange a few words with me?"

The Magnerru clapped his hands in repressed anger against his robe, followed Harry into the inner chambers. Evidently the informal approach found no responsive chord in him.

Hableyat settled beside Joe. Elfane looked stonily to one side. Hableyat wore a worried expression. His yellow

jowls hung flaccid, the eyelids drooped over his eyes.

Joe said, "Cheer up, Hableyat, you're not dead yet."

Hableyat shook his head. "The schemes of my entire life are toppling into fragments."

Joe looked at him sharply. Was the gloom exaggerated, the sighs over-doleful? He said guardedly, "I have yet to learn your positive program."

Hableyat shrugged. "I am a patriot. I wish to see my planet prosperous, waxing in wealth. I am a man imbued with the culture of my world; I can conceive of no better way of life, and I wish to see this culture expand, enriching itself with the cultures of other worlds, adapting the good, overcoming the bad."

"In other words," said Joe. "You're as strenuous an imperialist as your military friends. Only your methods are different."

"I'm afraid you have defined me," sighed Hableyat. "Furthermore I fear that in this era military imperialism is almost impossible—that cultural imperialism is the only practicable form. A planet cannot be successfully subjugated and occupied from another planet. It may be devastated, laid waste, but the logistics of conquest are practically insuperable. I fear that the adventures proposed by the Redbranch will exhaust Mang, ruin Ballenkarch and make the way easy for a Druid religious imperialism."

Joe felt Elfane stiffen. "Why is that worse than Mang cultural imperialism?"

"My dear Priestess," said Hableyat, "I could never argue cogently enough to convince you. I will say one word—that the Druids produce very little with a vast potentiality—that they live on the backs of a groaning mass—and that I hope the system is never extended to include me among the Laity."

"Me, either," said Joe.

Elfane jumped to her feet. "You're both vile!"

Joe surprised himself by reaching, pulling her back beside him with a thud.

She struggled a moment, then subsided.

"Lesson number one in Earth culture," said Joe cheerfully. "It's bad manners to argue religion."

A soldier burst into the chamber, panting, his face twisted in terror. "Horrible—out along the road . . . Where's the Prince? Get the Prince—a terrible growth!"

Hableyat jumped to his feet, his face sharp, alert. He ran nimbly out the door and after a second Joe said, "I'm going too."

Elfane, without a word, followed.

JOE had a flash impression of complete confusion. A milling mob of men circled an object he could not identify—a squat green-and-brown thing which seemed to writhe and heave.

Hableyat burst through the circle, with Joe at his side and Elfane pressing at Joe's back. Joe looked in wonder. The Son of the Tree?

It had grown, become complicated. No longer did it resemble the Kyril Tree. The Son had adapted itself to a new purpose—protection, growth, flexibility.

It reminded Joe of a tremendous dandelion. A white fuzzy ball held itself twenty feet above the ground on a slender swaying stalk, surrounded by an inverted cone of flat green fronds. At the base of each frond a green tendril, streaked and speckled with black, thrust itself out. Clapsed in these tendrils were the bodies of three men.

Hableyat squawked, "The thing's a devil," and clapped his hand to his pouch. But his weapon had been impounded by the Residence guards.

A Ballenkarch chieftain, his face pale and distorted, charged the Son, hacking with his saber. The fuzzy ball swayed toward him a trifle, the tendrils jerked back like the legs of an insect, then snapped in from all sides, wrapped the man close, pierced his flesh. He bawled, fell silent, stiffened. The tendrils flushed red, pulsed, and the Son grew taller.

Four more Ballenkarts, acting in grim

concert, charged the Son, six others followed. The tendrils thrust, snapped and ten bodies lay stiff and white on the ground. The Son expanded as if it were being magnified.

Prince Harry's light assured voice said, "Step aside. . . Now then, step aside."

Harry stood looking at the plant—twenty feet to the top of the fronds while the fuzzy white ball reared another ten above them.

The Son pounced, with a cunning quasi-intelligence. Tendrils unfurled, trapped a dozen roaring men, dragged them close. And now the crowd went wild, swayed back and forth in alternate spasms of rage and fear, at last charged in a screeching melee.

Sabres glittered, swung, chopped. Overhead the fuzzy white ball swung unhurriedly. It was sensate, it saw, felt, planned with a vegetable consciousness, calm, fearless, single-purposed. Its tendrils snaked, twisted, squeezed, returned to drain. And the Son of the Tree soared, swelled.

Panting survivors of the crowd fell back, staring helplessly at the corpse-strewn ground. Harry motioned to one of his personal guard. "Bring out a heat-gun."

The Arch-Thearchs came forward, protesting. "No, no, that is the Sacred Shoot, the Son of the Tree."

Harry paid them no heed. Gameanza clutched his arm with panicky insistence. "Recall your soldiers. Feed it nothing but criminals and slaves. In ten years it will be tremendous, a magnificent Tree."

Harry shook him off, jerked his head at a soldier. "Take this maniac away."

A projector on wheels was trundled from behind the Residence, halted fifty feet from the Son. Harry nodded. A thick white beam of energy spat against the Son. "Aaaaah!" sighed the crowd, in near-voluptuous gratification. The exultant sigh stopped short. The Son drank in the energy like sunshine, expanded, luxuriated, and grew. A hun-

dred feet the fuzzy white ball towered.

"Turn it against the top," said Harry anxiously.

The bar of energy swung up the slender stalk, concentrated on the head of the plant. It coruscated, spattered, ducked away.

"It doesn't like it!" cried Harry. "*Pour it on!*"

The Arch-Thearchs, restrained in the rear, howled in near-personal anguish.

"No, no, no!"

The white ball steadied, spat back a gout of energy. The projector exploded, blasting heads and arms and legs in every direction.

THERE was a sudden dead silence. Then the moans began. Then sudden screaming as the tendrils snapped forth to feed.

Joe dragged Elfane back and a tendril missed her by a foot. "But I am a Druid Priestess," she said in dull astonishment. "The Tree protects the Druids. The Tree accepts only the lay pilgrims."

"*Pilgrims!*" Joe remembered the Kyril pilgrims—tired, dusty, footsore, sick—entering the portal into the Tree. He remembered the pause at the portal, the one last look out across the gray land and up into the foliage before they turned and entered the trunk. Young and old, in all conditions, thousands every day . . .

Joe now had to crane his neck to see the top of the Son. The flexible central shoot was stiffening, the little white ball swung and twisted and peered over its new domain.

Harry came limping up beside Joe, his face a white mask. "Joe—that's the ungodliest creature I've seen on thirty-two planets."

"I've seen a bigger one—on Kyril. It eats the citizens by the thousand."

Harry said, "These people trust me. They think I'm some kind of god myself—merely because I know a little Earth engineering. I've got to kill that abomination."

"You're not throwing in with the Druids then?"

Harry sneered. "What kind of patsy do you take me for, Joe? I'm not throwing in with either one of 'em. A plague on both their houses. I've been holding 'em off, teasing 'em until I could get things straightened out. I'm still not satisfied—but I certainly didn't bargain for something like this. Who the hell brought the thing here?"

Joe was silent. Elfane said, "It was brought from Kyril by order of the Tree."

Harry stared. "My God, does the thing talk too?"

Elfane said vaguely, "The College of Thearchs reads the will of the Tree by various signs."

Joe scratched his chin.

"Hmph," said Harry. "Fancy decoration for a nice tight little tyranny. But that's not the problem. This thing's got to be killed!" And he muttered, "I'd like to get the main beast too, just for luck."

Joe heard—he looked at Elfane expecting to see her flare into anger. But she stood silent, looking at the Son.

Harry said, "It seems to thrive on energy . . . Heat's out. A bomb? Let's try blasting. I'll send down to the warehouse for some splat."

Gameanza tore himself loose, came running up with his gray robe flapping around his legs. "Excellency, we vehemently protest your aggressions against this Tree!"

"Sorry," said Harry, grinning sardonically. "I call it a murderous beast."

"Its presence is symbolic of the ties between Kyril and Ballenkarch," pleaded Gameanza.

"Symbolic my ankle. Clear that metaphysical rubbish out of your mind, man. That thing's a man-killer and I won't have it at large. I pity you for the king-size monster you've got on your own rock—although I suppose I shouldn't." He looked Gameanza up and down. "You've made pretty good use of the Tree. It's been your meal ticket

for a thousand years. Well, this one is on its way out. "In another ten minutes it'll be an acre of splinters."

Gameanza whirled on his heel, marched twenty feet away, where he conversed in low tones with Opoeto Implan. Ten pounds of explosive, packed with a detonator was heaved against the Son's heavy trunk. Harry raised the radiation gun which would project trigger-frequencies.

On sudden thought, Joe jerked forward, caught his arm. "Just a minute. Suppose you make an acre of splinters—and each one of the splinters starts to grow?"

Harry put down the projector. "That's a grisly thought."

Joe gestured around the countryside. "All these farms, they look well taken care of, modern."

"Latest Earth techniques. So what?"

"You don't let your bully-boys pull all the weeds by hand?"

"Of course not. We've got a dozen different weed-killers—hormones . . ." He stooped short, clapped Joe on the shoulder. "Weed-killers! *Growth* hormones! Joe, I'll make you Secretary of Agriculture!"

"First," said Joe, "let's see if the stuff works on the Tree." If it's a vegetable it'll go crazy."

The Son of the Tree went crazy.

The tendrils twined, contorted, snapped. The fuzzy white head spat chattering arcs of energy in random directions.

The fronds hoisted to a grotesque two hundred feet in seconds, flopped to the ground.

Another heat projector was brought. Now the Son resisted only weakly. The trunk charred; the fronds crisped, blackened.

In minutes the Son of the Tree was an evil-smelling stump.

PRINCE HARRY sat on his throne. The Arch-Thearchs Gameanza and Opoeto Implan stood with pallid faces muffled in their cowls. The Redbranch

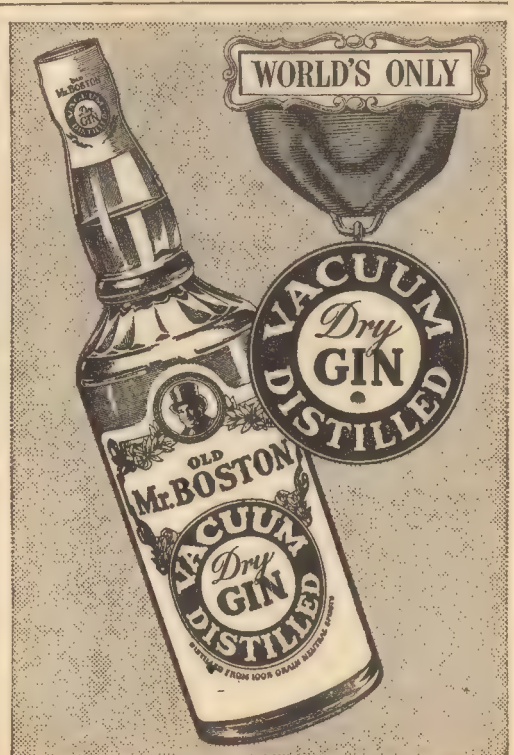
Mangs waited in a group to the side of the hall in a rigid system of precedence—first the Magnerru in his chased cuirass and scarlet robe, then Erru Kame-tin and behind him the two proctors.

Harry said in his light clear voice, "I haven't much to announce—except that for some months now there's been a widespread uncertainty as to which way Ballenkarch is going to jump—toward Mang or toward Kyril.

"Well," he shifted in his seat, put his hands along the arms of his throne, "the speculation has been entirely in the minds of the Druids and the Mangs there was never any indecision here on Ballenkarch. Once and for all we will team up with neither planet.

We'll develop in a different direction and I believe we'll end up with the finest world this side of Earth. Insofar as the Son of the Tree is concerned I hold no one personally responsible. You

[Turn page]



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Druids acted, I believe, according to your best lights. You're victims of your beliefs, almost as much as your Laity.

"Another thing—while we won't enter any political commitments we're in business. We'll trade. We're building tools—hammers, saws, wrenches, welders. In a year we'll start building electrical equipment. In five years we'll have a space-yard down there on the shore of Lake Alan.

"In ten years we'll be running our cargo to every star you can see in the night and maybe a few more. So—Magnerru, you can return and convey my message to your Ampianu General and the Lathbon. As for you Druids I doubt if you'll wish to return. There might be quite some turmoil on Kyril by the time you'd arrive."

Gameanza asked sharply, "How is that?"

Harry's mouth twitched. "Call it a guess."

* * * * *

From Harry's private sundeck, the water of Lake Alan glowed in a thousand shades of sunset. Joe sat in a chair. Beside him sat Elfane, in a simple white gown.

Harry paced up and down, talking, gesticulating, boasting. New reduction furnaces at Palinth, a hundred new schools, power units for the new farmer class, guns for his army.

"They've still got that barbarian streak," said Harry. "They love fighting, they love the wildness, their spring festivals, their night fire-dancing. It's born and bred into 'em and I couldn't take it out of 'em if I tried."

He winked at Joe.

"The fire-breathers I send out against the clans of Vail Macrombie—that's the other continent. I kill two birds with one stone. They work off all their beligerence against the Macrombie cannibals and they're gradually winning the continent. It's bloody, yes—but it fills a need in their souls.

"The young ones we'll bring up dif-

ferently. Their heroes will be the engineers rather than the soldiers and everything should work out about the same time. The new generation will grow up while their fathers are mopping up along Matenda Cape."

"Very ingenious," said Joe. "And speaking of ingenuity where's Hableyat? I haven't seen him for a day or so."

Harry dropped into a chair. "Hableyat's gone."

"Gone? Where?"

"Officially, I don't know—especially since we have Druids among us."

ELFANE stirred.

"I'm—no longer a Druid. I've torn it out of me. Now I'm a"—she looked up at Joe—"a what?"

"An expatriate," said Joe. "A space-waif. A woman without a country." He looked back to Harry. "Less of the mystery. It can't be that important."

"But it is! Maybe."

Joe shrugged. "Suit yourself."

"No," said Harry, "I'll tell you. Hableyat, as you know, is in disgrace. He's out and the Magnerru Ippolito is in. Mang politics are complex and cryptic but they seem to hinge a great deal on prestige—on face. The Magnerru lost face here on Ballenkarch. If Hableyat can perform some remarkable feat he'll be back in the running. And it's to our advantage to have the Bluewaters in power on Mangtse."

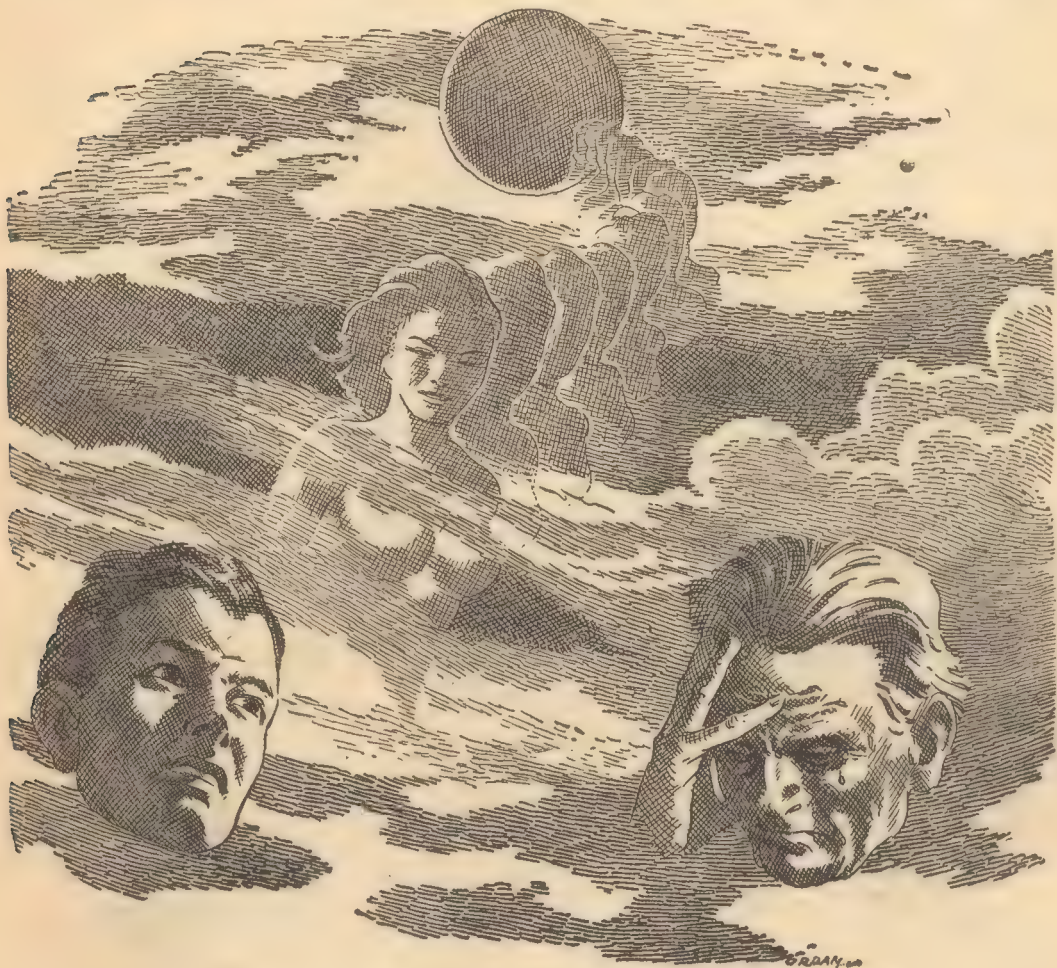
"Well?"

"I gave Hableyat all the anti-weed hormone we had—about five tons of it. He had it loaded into a ship I made available to him and took off." Harry made a whimsical gesture. "Where he's going—I don't know."

Elfane hissed softly under her breath, shivered, looked away out over Lake Alan, pink, gold, lavender, turquoise in the sunset. "The tree . . ."

Harry rose to his feet. "Time for dinner. If that's his plan—to spray the Tree with hormone—it should be quite a show."

By WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT



FOG

IT CAME on the second Tuesday in May, blanketing the city, shrouding the harbor, grounding everything at the airport. This city had known May fogs before and the inhabitants took the first few days of it in stride. It had been

a depressing winter and there was some grumbling naturally—but fog was expected in May.

Thursday of that week Elmer Naper, a painter by trade, of 1365 N. Ellemore, committed suicide. His wife found him

A Razor's Edge Divides Treason From—Heroism!

in the backyard when she came home from a card party. He'd blown most of his head off with a twelve-gauge shotgun. He'd been complaining about the fog.

The backyard angle made sense for a man using a shotgun. The backyard and the fog were not connected in the minds of the officers investigating the suicide. The backyard and the shotgun were logical. Elmer didn't want to mess up the house.

There have been suicides before.

On Friday morning there was another, a postal clerk named Servies. He hanged himself from a rafter in his garage. On Friday afternoon there were three, two men and one woman, in scattered sections of the city.

Suicides come in waves, the police knew. But four in one day—none of them in the house—all of them outside? There was nothing in the records like that.

In Washington the Old Man sent for Curt. He had a big map on his desk and he pointed at the spot which marked the fogbound city. Curt nodded and looked at the Old Man questioningly.

The Old Man shrugged his thin shoulders and his big head swiveled around to look out the window. In Washington it was clear and sunny.

"Why there?" Curt asked. "Why that city among all the others? You're assuming it's not a natural fog."

"I'm not assuming anything, Curt. If I assume that I assume an enemy. And who on this world is left to fight us?"

Who indeed? Russia was a desolate wasteland, still radioactive. England was a nation of shopkeepers again. The South American republics were allied finally, their mutual animosity confined to the legislative floor. Who on this earth...?

Curt said, "Nobody on this planet. You're right."

THERE had been no interplanetary travel yet. There was equipment for it—there was knowledge of life on Mars.

But in all the world there was only one strong country from a military standpoint and its strength was only comparative.

The Old Man said wearily, "Oh, Curt—Martians?" His smile was cynical.

"Venerians?" Curt suggested. "I was thinking of Venus, fogbound Venus."

"You weren't really thinking at all. You were dreaming, perhaps, Curt. You're serious, I hope?"

"I'm serious. We're so damned afraid of the unknown we're living in the middle ages. We're so sick of war we're not allowing our natural curiosity to grow. Why haven't they shot a ship to Mars? What are they waiting for?"

"For a resolute united people, free from confusion. We haven't had that since nineteen hundred twenty-nine."

"And we're not getting any closer to it," Curt said. "Because the people can't catch up to science science is retarded to their level. I can't think of a better weapon than fog. They've been living in it for fifty years."

"They?" the Old Man said. "You've some distinction in your mind, Curt? We aren't people?"

Curt faced his superior squarely. "Not in the ordinary sense, I hope. Not like—like those jerks who read cowboy stories and pay three bucks to see a football game. Not Jerks with a capital 'J.' I hope I'm not."

"Well," the Old Man said. "Well, Curt." He shook his head. "You'll have us under fire by a loyalty board. Personal troubles, lad? Love or money, maybe?"

Curt expelled his breath and sat down, his face in his hands. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Overwork, maybe," the Old Man said. "The department has a tendency to overload lads of your savvy, Curt. Overwork, we'll call it. Take a month."

Curt put his hands down, and shook his head. "I'll go, sir. It was—adolescent, that outburst. I'm all right. I'll go."

The Old Man shook his head.

"Please, sir. It's important, to me. I—like to think it's important to the department too—and to the world."

The Old Man's lined face was grave. His big head with its tangled thatch of gray hair seemed too heavy for his thin body. He looked almost grotesque. "Are you trying to tell me something, Curt?"

"I—don't understand you, sir."

"All right. You've been close to me, Curt. I never married and my parents died when I was a child. You've been—like my family. If there's anything troubling you . . ."

"Nothing, sir, nothing personal. Just an unreasonable resentment at the state of the world. I'm not Atlas, I realize now. You'll arrange transportation, sir?"

"Navy X-one-seven-D." The Old Man smiled. "You'll actually get there, traveling west, before you leave here. It's hardly off the drafting boards, that model. That make you feel better?"

"Some. I'm all right. I'm fine."

"Okay. Don't contact me tonight. I won't be home." He was smiling. "The Redskins are playing the Rams under the lights and I wangled a pair of tickets from Judge Aarons."

"Me and my big mouth!" Curt said.

"I'm an old man and senile. Luck, Curt."

In his apartment Curt packed leisurely, thinking of his outburst in the Old Man's office. What was happening to him? He'd almost given the whole show away. He'd actually told the Old Man the true story. And the old boy had smiled.

Smiled—Curt paused in his packing. And wasn't it coincidental that *he*, of all the agents, should be called in? He didn't underestimate the Old Man. Very little escaped him—and this coincidence was too far out of the realm of possibility.

He sat down on the bed suddenly, his knees weak. The Old Man knew. He had to know. It didn't make sense otherwise.

The red light at the foot of his bed was flashing. He was at the door when it buzzed. He opened it, and Vera stood there.

She was a beautiful girl, firm-bodied and slim, smooth-skinned and vibrant. Her oriental dark-brown eyes were mocking Curt. "You're going to the Coast."

He nodded. "Come in, darling. How did you know?"

"It was arranged. Did you think it was a coincidence?"

"Something more than that," Curt said. "I'd forgotten about your—your thought control."

"To put it simply—we don't control people of that mental level, Curt." She was smiling. "Aren't you going to kiss me?"

HER lips were soft, her body pressing firmly into his. Curt drew away after a moment. "You don't control people of that mental level? You mean that in the department there are other . . . ?" He didn't finish.

"Traitors?" She finished for him. "Is that the word you were going to use?"

"Is that what I'm considered on your planet?"

"No. Curt, if you're doubtful, if you feel some affinity with these—these comic-strip readers—you can—"

"Quit? Can I really, dear?"

She was silent, her dark eyes studying him. He said, "I've only got a couple hours and I don't imagine I'll see you on the Coast. Come here, you temptress."

"I'll be out there," she said. "But there's *now* and that's all we can be sure of today." She came over to him.

* * * * *

The Old Man hadn't lied about the X17D. It was a smoothly contoured duralyte ship, resembling a saucer more than anything else. The entire outer shell revolved, rotated by the blast ports along its chromolux rim. The pilot's soundproofed compartment was gyro-

scopically leveled, cushioned against the tremor of its supersonic blast speed.

There was room for one other besides the pilot and this one other, on tonight's western trip, was Agent Curt Belfast of the Department of Science.

The pilot was Tom Allis. "Long time no see, Curt," he said. "How do you like my new baby?"

"She looks sleek. Moves?"

"Moves. Remember, when we were kids and used to skip stones on a pond? That's the way she moves through space, only a little quicker, of course. She should do over nineteen hundred."

"We'll be at the Coast before we leave here," Curt said. "I'd have legal grounds for two suppers on the swindle sheet. All set, Tom?"

"If you are I am. Nervous, Curt?"

"No. Should I be?"

"No. But I am. And I'm the pilot. You always were a cold potato, laddie. Let's go."

They went. The take-off was all sound and fury but once in flight there was no sensation whatever. There was no vision except the radar-III screen; the controls were all automatic.

In their oxylite chairs Tom and Curt watched the red band of the rameter. Curt said, after a few minutes, "What did you mean, Tom, by cold potato?"

"Forget it. Maybe I was annoyed because you weren't nervous."

"No, I'm serious. Do you think I'm cold—I mean, without social consciousness?"

"Whatever the hell that is. I think you could live on an uninhabited island the rest of your life without fretting too much."

"Oh, no. No, I couldn't."

"Well, with a blonde or two and an equipped lab then."

"Oh, hell yes. Couldn't you? Changing the lab for a really hot air-buggy and the blondes for whatever you relish in that field. Couldn't you then, Tom?"

"Nope—I like people. I really do. All kinds of people. Even you, Curt, when you let your hair down."

The red worm of the rameter crawled along its channel, almost a fourth of the trip already gone. It was at the halfway mark when Tom said, "What gives with this fog?"

"What fog?"

"Cut it out," Tom said. "Science sends a man out tonight. State sent one out this afternoon to say nothing of the lads the Department of Agriculture's got out there. What's the gimmick?"

"I don't know what they're doing there. I'm going out to see my girl."

"Sure, sure. All right, I'm just a chauffeur. All the medals won't change that. And I was so proud of them." He held a hand up for silence, watching the rameter ribbon. It was almost at the end of its long channel.

There was the sound of a buzzer, and Tom said into his phone, "Special Flight S, Special Flight S. Priority Top A."

They were ground-controlled from here in.

The oxylite chairs rocked gently. Tom said, "I should have a change-maker and a blue uniform with brass buttons. And one of those gadgets to punch tickets. They don't need a flier for this."

"You've still got your medals," Curt said. "And the memory of all those dead Russians."

Tom's glance was steady as his voice. "You're a nice guy. You've got a damned cute sense of humor, haven't you?"

The chairs had stopped rocking. Two blue lights appeared over the rameter ribbon.

CURT stood up. "I apologize. There's a streak of the illegitimate in me. But you shouldn't have called me cold, Tom. You shouldn't have said that."

The door was in the floor beneath them and opening now, under the pressure of the hydraulic openers. A ladder was coming up from below. Curt paused at the top of the ladder. "Friends, Tom?"

"What difference does it make to you,

Mr. Belfast? You don't need any friends."

Curt smiled. "We used to be friends, Tom."

"Not since we were twelve. We're in different worlds, Curt. So long."

Curt smiled and went down into the fog. Only the ground-controlled planes could use the field and only the military had completely ground-controlled equipment.

At the bottom of the ladder Agent Alan Bentrey of State was waiting. "Some machine, eh? Navy?"

"Navy," Curt said, "though it's an outmoded term. They haven't a single water-going vessel."

"Tradition," Bentrey said. "John Paul Jones and all that. We're not alone, Curt."

From the fog another shape materialized. Bentrey said, "Dr. Vitesman, this is Mr. Belfast." And to Curt, "Dr. Vitesman's the director of the local Air Pollution Control."

They shook hands. Curt said, "What luck so far, Doctor?"

"None. We aren't really equipped. Our micro-impactors are as ancient as the smog they were originally designed for and we haven't had smog for thirty years. I was glad to get those new microscopes you sent. We were still using electronic microscopes in our lab."

"And the new ones showed nothing?"

"Nothing." Dr. Vitesman cleared his throat. "Did you expect we'd find something?"

Curt looked at Bentrey but the State man's face was not visible in the fog. Curt said, "I could use some coffee. The restaurant on the flight deck operating?" They were walking toward the amber lights of the gate.

"Yes," Dr. Vitesman said. "Their business is mostly local, anyway. Their coffee is nothing special."

"But their waitresses are," Curt said.

"Doctor—what made you ask if we expected you to find something?"

"Because I can't believe that what is

in that fog is something a microscope would reveal. Even with a two-million magnification. Any more than it could reveal a rumor."

"Psychiatrist, Doctor?"

"No but a number of my friends are."

"And they . . . ?"

"Are inclined to the psychic. I'm expecting them all to start wearing turbans any day now and trade in their Z-Rays for a crystal ball."

"It's a strange world we inhabit, Doctor."

"Speak for yourself, young man. My world's all right."

Curt laughed. "Doctor, you're a conservative. You and Alan, here, should get together."

Dr. Vitesman led the way into the tunnel that led to the mammoth building at the north end of the field. They walked along quietly, the three of them, for seconds.

Then Dr. Vitesman said, "There's a pernicious and universal guilt complex from the war. There isn't a person in this city who doesn't connect this blasted fog with it in one way or another. Even if it was an ordinary fog the depressing effect of it, combined with this mass neurosis—"

"Would cause a suicide wave," Curt finished. "And those microscopes we sent have shown you it's an ordinary fog. And how else could a scientific mind analyze it?"

"I don't know," the doctor said wearily. "There is knowledge of which we haven't even the beginnings. There are things we don't even suspect that our grandsons will take for granted. I can't go into the unknown from nowhere. Nor can I follow my psychiatric brothers."

"I can't even follow *you*," Curt said lightly. "You mean the fog is a sort of symbolism, a concrete embodiment of the universal state of mind?"

"That's only part of it. Lord knows there aren't many certainties left these days, are there?"

"The same as always," Bentrey said. "Death and taxes."

The tax growth started in thirty-two," Curt said, "but death managed to catch up by Forty-one and pass it in fifty-five. Those two certainties grow bigger every day, Doctor, and they were all we ever had, really."

The Doctor sighed. "I-should know better than to argue with two bright young men at the same time—government men, at that. If you lads are a sample of what we're getting for our taxes I guess we aren't getting cheated—much."

"I'll buy the coffee," Curt said. "You're a discerning man, Doctor."

THEY came up into the bright lights of the lower deck and walked past the Eurasia ticket office to the escalator. Mike Elman's Flight Deck Grille was about half empty this evening. They took a table near the big windows facing the field and ordered coffee.

Curt was facing the doorway when Vera entered. He stared, his hands rigid on the table, and Alan turned to follow his stare. Alan said, "I see what you mean. Mama manana. I could use some of that."

"I know her," Curt said.

"Knowing her wouldn't constitute possession," Alan answered. "Why don't you wave or something?"

Dr. Vitesman said, "I'd like to remind you gentlemen that we have some rather important problems to discuss. As a local man, perhaps I overestimate the importance of this fog. But I'm sure your superiors don't think so or they wouldn't have sent you."

Curt said, "I'm sorry, Doctor. I was—shocked. She's a rather close friend and I didn't expect to see her here."

They talked. They discussed the fog in all its aspects and covered all the theories thus far advanced. What else could they do but talk? The stuff had been analyzed—and found to be fog. The suicides had been investigated—

and found to be suicides.

They drank coffee and talked. And near the door Vera sat at a small table, nursing Martinis.

The doctor said, "Well, after five cups of coffee and a few thousand words we're right where we started. I rather expected, when you gentlemen came, there'd be something new on it from Washington. It's obvious you're as puzzled as we are."

Alan said, "Is that right, Curt? Are we all as puzzled as Doctor Vitesman?"

Curt frowned. "Aren't you?"

"Almost—and you?"

Curt rubbed his forehead. "Oh, there are theories. But we've had enough theories. I'm waiting for a message."

Both of them were intent on him, now. "Message?" Dr. Vitesman said.

Curt looked at Alan. "Isn't that what State's waiting for?"

Alan said quietly, "We don't know but we're waiting."

Dr. Vitesman said slowly, "Am I to infer there's some—some outside agent involved in this mystery? Are you gentlemen implying an enemy?"

Curt nodded. Dr. Vitesman snorted. "Oh, Lord! The Miami Chamber of Commerce, perhaps? Washington will go to any lengths to promote a war scare, won't they? I retract my statement about our taxes not going to waste. Gentlemen, would you mind naming the enemy?"

"We don't know the enemy," Curt said. "We do suggest that all the inhabitants who aren't involved in essential services stay home. Ninety percent of the homes in this city are air-conditioned. We don't know if that will help or not. But all the suicides have been outside. That doesn't follow the suicide pattern. Doctor, you said yourself that there is knowledge of which we haven't even the beginning."

"That I did—but I didn't expect my words to come back and bite me." He rose. "You gentlemen have accommodations in town? I've plenty of room at my house."

"I'm a motel man, myself," Curt said. "Reminds me of my childhood."

Alan was grinning. "I think our friend wants to be alone, Doctor. Introverted men of science, you know. I'll go into town with you." He turned to Curt. "Lunch, tomorrow? I'm staying at the Capistrano."

"I'll see you there."

Curt waited until they were gone before taking the empty chair across from Vera. "How did you do it?" he said. "Tom tells me that ship will do nineteen hundred but I happen to know we were close to three thousand. And I arrive to find you here."

"I came on my broom." She mocked him. "Did all the words do any good?"

"None." He studied her. "I thought the physical sciences weren't a Venerian strong point."

"I'm here. Twelve more suicides today. Tomorrow there'll be a hundred."

"And nothing tangible."

"Just the fog. You see, Curt, there are the metaphysical sciences, too."

His smile was bitter. "With physical agents. Darling, no one would call your charms metaphysical."

"Thank you. But we can be destroyed physically. Fourteen of us could scarcely fight the world—physically."

"Fourteen," he said. "You mean, on all Venus, there are only fourteen—of—of you?"

"Surprised? Fourteen is all—and we'll rule Terra. Fifteen with you. You've no idea what an ideal situation that will be. Fifteen people with over two billion slaves."

Curt was silent. Vera said quietly, "And after that—Mars. With Terra's industrial strength and knowledge, with our will and thought control, we'll be—invincible."

"Maybe. We can't be too sure of Mars."

"Even with Herculo seven?"

THREE people on earth knew about Herculo seven and Curt was one of them. It was the new super-explosive

without critical mass. A ton of it would disintegrate any planet in the heavens.

After a few moments Curt said, "Yes, with Herculo seven even Mars would—I think I'll have a drink."

His remark about liking motels had been more than a gag. His mother had died when he was born and his father was a man who liked to travel. Curt had seen America from the windows of a thousand motels. His dad had died when Curt was fifteen and there had been nobody after that, nobody important—excepting himself and his work.

Tonight the fog was all around his cabin and his thoughts were all around the universe. Tonight he kept going back to the scene in the Old Man's office. He saw again the lined tired face and heard again, "You've been—like my family. If there's anything troubling you . . ."

The seeds of treason are usually planted early. They flourish in a world without affection. The numerous ladies of Curt Belfast's outer life had never satiated his hunger for affection. The Old Man, with his few lonely words, had scored beyond any of them.

But he was in this thing now—up to the neck. The world could fight any foe with tangible weapons. The world couldn't fight the fog of Venus without destroying the fourteen inhabitants of that metaphysical land and the world had no weapons against fear. Nor, seemingly, against confusion.

In the morning he asked her, "How did you get out here so fast?"

"Is it important?"

"Faith is important to me, faith between us."

"Then you shouldn't ask. I'm here, Curt. In New Mexico the ship is ready."

That too was supposedly secret. "The Mars ship?" Curt asked.

"We'll call it the Venus ship. You and I, in that, taking the answer back to my people."

"The answer?"

"The answer. The head of your de-

partment will have the question tomorrow. The Secretary of State will have it. And the President."

"Aren't you rushing things? A hundred suicides aren't going to panic men of that caliber."

"We can give them a thousand—or a million. Or more."

"You're telling me the-truth, Vera?"

"Shall I prove it?"

He didn't answer. He went to the window and saw the fog and came back to pour a drink.

"Curt Belfast," she said. "King of the Universe. If the mantle's too big, Curt, say so now."

A million or more . . . In the last war eighty million had died. Death was becoming commonplace. But slavery . . .

He said, "I've got to think. Fourteen—I thought, of course . . . Are they all here? Or . . . ?"

"On Venus. I can stand the atmosphere here but they haven't evolved to that yet."

Evolved, *evolved* . . . He said, "You're here alone?"

She smiled. "Faith—you said before? Are you really going to think or have you decided?"

"I've got to think," he repeated.

"All right. I won't distract you. I'll be back."

He didn't look up until the door closed. Then he poured another drink. Then he unpacked his short wave twain-ra. It was no bigger than a table radio and not nearly as gaudy as most of them. He plugged it in and pressed the twin red buttons. He heard the hum and then the Old Man's secretary.

"Come in."

"Curt Belfast. The Chief in?"

"Just a second, Curt. He's been waiting."

Then the Old Man's voice. "We've got your Vera, laddie. Picked her up when she left your apartment yesterday afternoon."

Curt said nothing, his heart pounding, his stomach pitching.

"Playing your own game, were you, Curt?"

A PAUSE, a deep breath and, "Yes, sir."

"Dangerous business, boy. You're not equipped for it. Luckily it was our men who grabbed her. And I've told them I was aware of it all. You were working under my orders."

Curt said, "Sir, I—"

"Never mind. I'll ride with you on it. You've always been my boy, Curt. If you want to confess, confess to me or your God. I understand you. I'm a lot like you."

"But, sir, Vera was just here. She —"

"I'm not an authority on genetics," the old man said, "but I wouldn't doubt if they were all Veras. They've evolved into a standard identical type. Mystics, aren't they?"

"I don't know what the hell they are except possibly embodied evil. They're beyond me, sir."

"Well, this one says there are twelve left back there and holding her isn't going to do anything but incur their wrath. I think they're scientific morons myself."

"And metaphysical giants," Curt answered.

"We'll compromise on freaks," the Old Man said. "Tom Allis is ready to take the answer back."

"That means you've got the question. They want me to take the answer back, sir. What do they demand?"

"In a word, slavery."

"And you've an answer?"

"I've just come from the President, Curt. We've an answer." A pause. "Tom's on his way to New Mexico now."

"They want me, sir—Vera and me. This Vera out here will do. They can increase the power of that fog, sir. We haven't the right to—"

"Curt—Tom can be trusted."

"And I can't?"

A silence.

Then Curt said, "Vera told me they

planned to kill a hundred today. If there are more, substantially more, it will be because they know what's happened in Washington. If I go it will look as if their wishes are being carried out. It will save lives, sir."

A pause and then, "I'll get another audience with the President. Hang on, Curt."

He sat there, not drinking, not smoking, thinking of the Old Man and how he'd underestimated him—and overestimated himself. Sweat ran down the backs of his hands, dropped onto the floor. The door opened, and Vera came in.

He forced a smile. "I know how you did it, sweet. Your twin's being held in Washington."

"So . . . ?" Her eyes were searching, her face without expression.

"Are you all alike?"

"All but the seven men. You're in contact with Washington?"

Curt snapped off the twain-ra. "No." "Faith, lover? Turn it on again."

A test, really. He paused only a second before pressing the twin red buttons.

Then the Old Man's voice. "Okay, Curt. You win. The ship's waiting in New Mexico. Tom will come to pick you up. He'll take you there. He'd like to go along though."

"Just Vera and I," Curt said. "Isn't that right, Vera?"

"That's right," she said and smiled. "There won't be any more suicides after we leave—not any we impelled. The quicker the better."

The Old Man said, "How about me? I could be useful."

"You'll be useful—later," Vera said. "There are so many things we don't know."

The Old Man chuckled. Curt snapped it off. Vera said suspiciously, "He doesn't seem disheartened or defeated."

"I've given up trying to figure him out. Tell me something—are you real? Or are you just real in my mind?"

"Any complaints?"

"No, just my natural curiosity. What kind of a place is Venus?"

"Venus is real. It gives us all reality. You'll find me there but I won't be any different than this projection of me you're looking at now. Without Venus there wouldn't be this me or the other one."

"And I wouldn't find you different on Venus? That's an Earth body you're wearing." And then he paused. "*It's an Earth body you're both wearing.*"

"How clever of you! The body of Miss Amelia Dickerson of Devers, Montana. Not bad either, is it?"

Freaks, the old man had called them. Monsters was a better word. Curt stood up. "We'd better get ready to go."

Tom was waiting at the airport when they got there. Tom said, "It's going to be kind of cramped. chum."

"Chums now, huh?"

"If it's all right with you." Tom's hand was out.

Curt took it and said, "I don't think you know the whole story, Tom."

"I don't need to know the rest. Look at my medals. I can tell a hero when I see one." He was grinning.

"But can you tell a heel?"

Vera looked questioningly at Curt and he smiled at her, winked and shrugged. She smiled.

Tom said, "Well, what are we waiting for?"

ON THE concrete-and-lead crater that housed the Venus ship there was a ladder, leading up the sheer walls to the compartment-amidships.

Tom paused at the foot of the ladder. Tom said, "I hope you understand this baby, Curt."

Curt's smile was bleak. "I understand it—all of it. Tom, I helped design it and build it. Give my regards to the gang."

Dr. Reslone was coming along from the radio tower. He said, "The fog's lifting, Curt. I guess it's the word." He came over to grip Curt's hand.

Curt said, "You lads act like I'm not

coming back. I'm in the hands of friends. At least one. Right, Vera?"

Tom looked at her and back at Curt. Then he turned abruptly and walked off.

Curt said, "Tom's sentimental. Loaded and ready, Doctor?"

"Loaded and ready. I—well . . ." He too turned and walked away.

Vera said, "What's the matter with them?"

"They just don't have faith in you, honey. But I do. And you have faith in me, haven't you?"

"Complete faith," she said. "What other course have you—lover?"

They went up the ladder together and into the passenger compartment. Below them, a mile down the plain, the control operator set the first phase of the propulsive blast into operation. Then, seconds later, the giant rocket-shaped sheath of glowing admium began to leave its crater.

Then the white glare of its propulsive tail blast, brightening the entire country. And then it was a comet in the sky, growing smaller and smaller and smaller.

* * * * *

In his office there were tears in the Old Man's eyes. His lined face was twisted in anguish.

His secretary said, "Some reporters, sir."

He nodded. "I'll talk to them."

The first one said, "Sir, we've a story regarding some kind of rocket that left the New Mexico—"

"A space-ship," the Old Man said, "carrying one of our agents. One of our best agents, gentlemen. And a martyr."

"Martyr?" One of the writers said. "You mean, sir . . . ?"

"I mean he's directing the space-ship with a ton of a new explosive in its nose. An explosive, gentlemen, that will blast a planet into gas. The planet is Venus and when the ship reaches it there will be no more Venus. And that's all I have to say today."

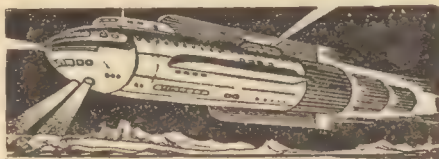
"But, sir . . ."

The Old Man raised his hand. "Gentlemen, he's been—he's been all the son I've ever known. And though I'm proud of him today you'll understand, I hope, there are times when a man has no words."

They left and his secretary came in.

She said, "He knew, then, about the explosive?"

"He knew. He was a strange lad, Donna. A little too big and a little too bright for our world. And too much alone. He couldn't have any destiny but this."



Two Short Novels Featured Next Issue

ALARM REACTION

A Novel of the Fourth Order Drive by **RAYMOND F. JONES**

EARTHLIGHT

A Novel of the Atomic Future by **ARTHUR C. CLARKE**



"Find out where she lives," I whispered

Girl From Callisto

By **ROGER DEE**

Follow the cosmic courtship of Calvin Clinch!

THE world is going to think I'm nuts when I tell about what happened to me and Prof Calvin Clinch that night last month in the Marlboro University electronics lab. I hate to talk about it on that account but I'm afraid to keep quiet. I don't mean I'm just uneasy either—brother, I'm *scared*!

Probably nobody will believe me anyway now that the Prof is gone, taking the details of his tele-radar gadget with him, but the whole thing weighs so heavy on my mind that I can't sleep nights and I've got to get it off . . .

* * * * *

I was moping across the campus past

the Science Building and wondering if I could talk Peggy Warren into taking in the Saturday night frat party with me when Prof Clinch stuck his head out a top-story window.

"Will you come up for a few minutes, William?" he called down. "You're just the man to help me with an experiment."

I said sure and turfed in, wondering what old "Kid Einstein" could be doing that needed my manly physique. Probably he had something heavy to move, since I run more to football than to physics. But the Prof was a good egg in a vague string-bean way and I took the chance. He was only about thirty but was rated one of the best research men in the electronics field. Most of us predicted that he'd wind up eventually at M. I. T.

The Prof wasn't moving anything. He only wanted me to stand before a big metal cabinet freckled with meters and gauges and twist a certain dial when he said twist. He read the answers on a jigger like a television screen and we were through in five minutes.

"Thank you, William," he said, showing his sandy hair out of his eyes and staggering a little. "I can finish alone."

I gave him the fatherly eye because if ever I saw a man on the ragged edge of collapse it was Prof Clinch. He was pale and jittery and hollow-eyed as if he hadn't slept for a week.

"You're off your feed, Prof," I told him. "Better burn less midnight oil or they'll be coming for you in the bug-wagon."

"I don't dare rest now," he said, giving me a funny look. "William, I may need more help and I find that I must trust someone with my discovery. Will you come back at eight tonight?"

I was broke, Peggy was sore at me, football training didn't begin for two weeks and there was nothing to do in the dorm but study. What the heck, I thought, I might as well give the poor guy a hand before he blew a fuse up here all alone.

I couldn't know then, of course, that

he was going to blow one anyway.

I BREEZED in at eight and found the Prof crouched over his television screen, as pale as a ghost and staring for all he was worth. I took a look at his program and stared harder than the Prof, because it wasn't a wrestling match or a rehashed opera he was pulling in. It wasn't even Milton Berle—it was something out of this world. And you can read that twice because it was the terrific truth!

The screen pictured a perfectly normal man standing in a lab pretty much like the Prof's, staring out at us and moving his lips like an actor in a silent movie. He looked normal, I said, but he wasn't *right*.

He wore his hair too long, fastened in place with a shiny metal band, and he was draped in an open-front cloak that let you see he wasn't wearing anything underneath but a pair of tights. He was trying hard to get across a message of some sort but there wasn't a sound.

"What is this, Prof?" I asked. "Don't tell me you've gone and made contact with Planet X!"

The Prof turned a strained face toward me. "Out of the mouths of babes," he said and gave a hollow laugh. "You're quite right, William, except this isn't Planet X. I don't know where it is but it definitely isn't Earth!"

Maybe I shouldn't have been so ready to believe him but in this day of atom bombs and flying saucers anything is possible. And the Prof never joked—he just didn't know how.

It seemed that he had been working on the echo-response of a new type of radar-sounder—I think that's what he called it—and a couple of nights ago he had picked up a signal that wasn't an echo from his own transmitter. It was an answer instead.

"It was a beautifully modulated carrier beam," he said. "It came from the east, rose with the clock to the zenith and dipped below the western horizon at daybreak. I checked its angle of inci-

dence and found that it did not originate on Earth at all."

He worked all night to dig a meaning out of that carrier, and finally found that it wasn't a voice-wave but a vision-beam. The voice-track was on another frequency which he couldn't reach.

He worked out a circuit to unscramble the carrier, though, and spent all next day soldering together several thousand dollars' worth of Marlboro U's cathode ray tubes and such stuff. And that night he didn't sleep again because this off-center theory of his turned out to be a bullseye. The screen worked!

"You see what I discovered," the Prof said, taking out his pocket watch and glancing at it. "But this is not all. They seem to operate this transmitter of theirs on a relief schedule and it's about time for—"

The watch dropped and smashed on the concrete floor but he didn't give it a second look. Neither did I after I saw the girl who had just replaced the man on the screen.

"Woof!" I said and it was an understatement. She was really out of this world—and you can read that both ways, too.

She looked out of the screen and smiled and I could see the Prof was hard hit. He never gave the girls a tumble before, finding more comfort in squiggly equations and homeless electrons. But he was hooked now and by a girl from Hector knows where!

I could understand why too because this girl was more than just pretty. She was more than beautiful—she was *something*! She made every other girl I ever saw look like something left over from Sadie Hawkins Day.

She began to talk silently and the Prof reached out and flipped a switch on the cabinet we had tuned up earlier in the day.

"Now," he said, "we'll try out our own transmitter."

A screen lighted up in that other lab, with my face and the Prof's staring fuzzily out of it. The girl ran across

the room, moving like a ballet dancer, and tuned us in as sharp as you please.

That was her first sight of Prof Clinch and she must have been as surprised as he was when he first saw her. They smiled at each other and started signaling like crazy and all at once something stranger was happening than I had seen yet.

Because this girl, whoever and wherever she was, was as hard hit as the Prof. It was too plain to miss—she would even stop right in the middle of a sentence, blushing, and drop her eyes. It was something to watch, believe me.

Finally I saw the Prof wasn't getting anywhere, so I nudged him in the ribs. "Find out where she lives," I whispered. "It's going to be pretty sad if a babe like that can't be reached!"

"Of course, of course," he said, and snatched up a piece of cardboard.

He found out where she was by drawing a diagram of the Solar System on the cardboard, putting in an arrow pointing to the third planet to show that we lived on Earth.

The girl got the idea and sketched a diagram of her own, showing the planets from the Sun out as the Prof had done. But she wasn't on any of the planets. She had drawn in the moons of Jupiter, and one of them was marked with an arrow like the Prof's.

She lived on Callisto, Jupiter's fourth moon. And Callisto, in round figures, is four hundred million miles from Earth!

KNOWING that she was so far out of reach hit the Prof like a kick in the stomach and his face showed it. The girl caught his look and came right up to the screen with a tender questioning look in her eyes.

The past couple of days of hard work and no sleep must have broken down some of the Prof's inhibitions because he made a corny gesture whose meaning she couldn't miss—he held out both arms just as if he expected her to step out of the screen into them.

The man we had first seen came back

into the picture then, not looking too happy about this new development. I gathered from their resemblance that they were brother and sister and I could understand why he should be a little dubious about his sister's falling in love with a man clear across the Solar System.

It was Brother who solved the Prof's problem, though, after the girl explained everything to him in rapid-fire Callistan. He shrugged and took up the chart she had drawn, adding a little squiggle that couldn't have been anything but a space-ship. Then he drew a quick arc from Callisto to Earth.

He touched Earth, made a revolving motion and held up one finger. The way he did it made his meaning as plain as day and the reason behind it was just as clear. He could reach Earth in one day in this space-boat of his and he was willing to do it to humor his kid sister.

That was a hot one, I thought. If Sister took a fancy to run down to Earth and see the Prof in person Big Brother was not only going to escort her—he was coming along as chaperon!

Brother went off then, probably to have a grease-monkey gas up his spacecrate, leaving the girl and the Prof signaling at each other like two deaf-mutes. I got tired of that, being left completely out of it, and killed time by browsing through the Prof's electronics magazines.

Some of the articles I read were pretty good or would have been if they hadn't switched from English to Greek symbols and sine-curves just when they began to get interesting.

The Prof made progress—he got his name across to her, and learned hers by watching her lips. It was Ilya and it fitted her like a glove.

I must have dozed off then because all at once the screen was blank and sunlight was streaming in through the skylight. I tried to make the Prof relax and take a nap but he wouldn't hear of it.

"I must devise a guide-beam to lead

them here," he said. "It would be tragic if they should land in the wrong place and be arrested for illegal entry!"

So we worked all day, busy as beavers, on another gadget. I was worn to a whisper by dark and the Prof looked like the walking dead. I made coffee over a Bunsen burner and made him drink a cup but I couldn't pull him away from his precious screen.

The sun set finally behind the old library building and the Prof snapped on his tele-radar. I climbed a wall ladder to open the skylight and set up a small tripod telescope on the roof. I got it focused at last at what the Prof said was the proper angle and we were all set—we thought.

THE picture came in stronger than it had the night before. The scene was different too—instead of the Callistan lab Ilya and her brother were in a small streamlined cubicle of some sort. They waved to us when the screen lighted up and Ilya gave the Prof her special smile.

"They must have started at once," the Prof said, squeezing my arm so hard it went numb. He checked his radar gadget for the thousandth time and did a double jitter. "They're practically here, William—another hour or two!"

"Then we ought to be able to pick them up in the telescope," I said and went up on the roof. I swept the sky from end to end but couldn't see a thing but the same old zillion stars.

"They must be inside Earth's atmosphere by now," the Prof called up later. "Can't you see them yet?"

I couldn't and it made me uneasy because no matter how fast they traveled their ship should have blacked out a star now and then. I ought to have spotted them long ago.

"Get that guide-beam dingus lined up," I yelled back. "If we're going to keep a light in the window tonight we'd better—"

His shout nearly made me fall through the open skylight.

"The radar shows a zero reading!" he called. "William, are you sure—"

Something whizzed past my face so fast that I ducked and knocked over the telescope. I slid down the ladder like a squirrel and ran across the lab to the big screen where the Prof stood, his eyes bulging and his face as white as milk.

At the first look I thought I was nuts—then something I had read in the Prof's electronics magazines popped into my head and explained everything.

The size of a televised image, the article had read, is determined, not by the size or power of the transmitter but by the dimensions of the receiving screen.

The Callistan ship was resting on top of the Prof's tele-radar cabinet!

It was about ten inches long and the two tiny figures that jumped out and stared up at us were each about one inch tall. I had to stoop close to recognize Ilya and at that distance I saw that the Prof's gadget had misled us again, because it was black-and-white and didn't show colors.

Ilya and her brother were as purple as a pair of grapes!

We must have looked even more horrible, towering over them as we did, because they squeaked like a couple of baby mice and scampered back into their pocket-sized ship.

It blasted off like a bullet, spitting a blue-white flame of exhaust that scorched our eyebrows and left us as blind as bats for fifteen minutes. When we could see again they were gone and the Prof's radar brain-child was nothing but a smoking heap of melted metal and fused glass.

"Wow!" I said.

The Prof didn't say anything at all—he just walked out of the lab and disappeared. A couple of weeks later the Marlboro U trustees received a letter containing his resignation and a check to cover the damaged equipment but there was no return address.

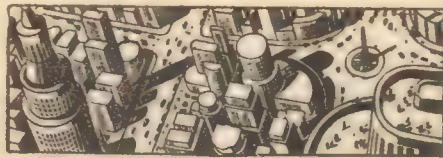
And that's all. The Prof is still missing and I don't think we'll hear from him again.

* * * * *

But I'm still here, and I'm scared. I keep wondering how long it will be before another wild-eyed genius like the Prof makes contact with a different sort of super-civilization out there among the stars—and thinking about what may happen next time positively gives me the collywobbles.

The Callistans are no threat to Earth, of course, being a thousand times smaller than men. But suppose the next race we stumble across should turn out to be different?

Suppose they're a thousand times bigger?

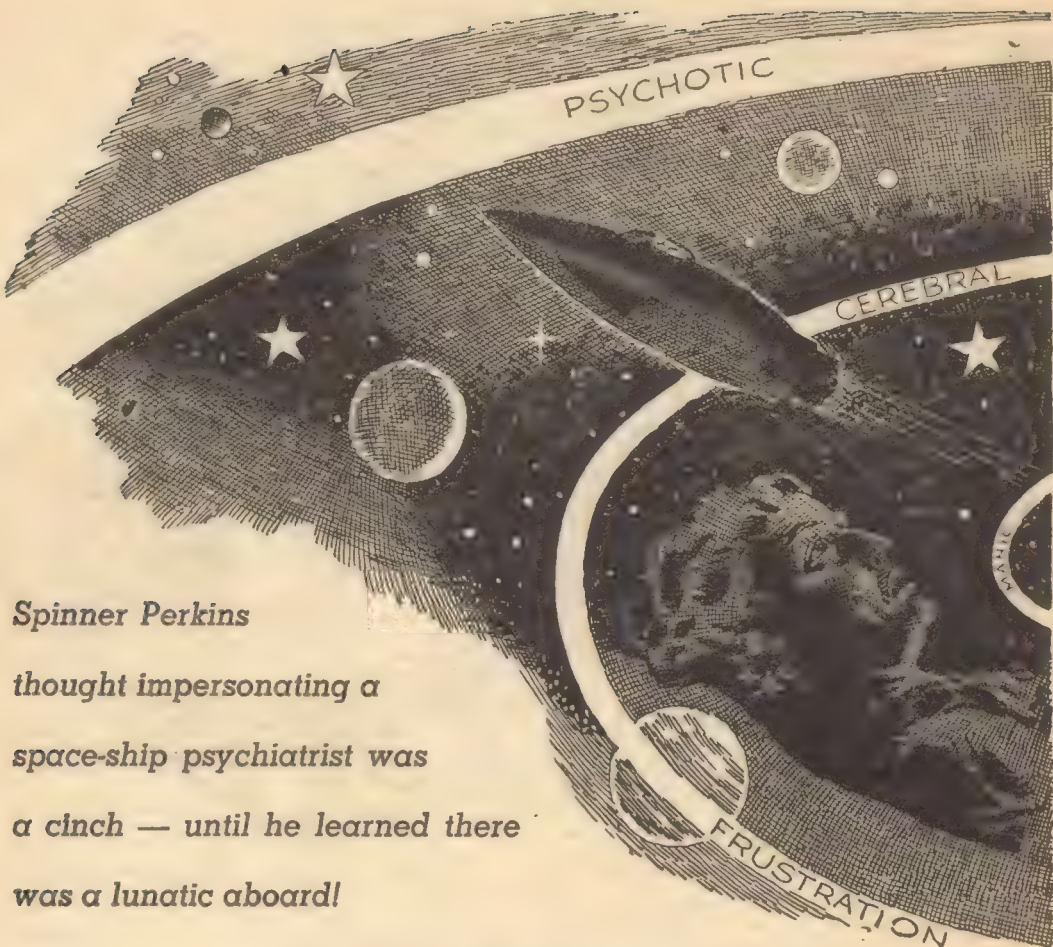


Coming in the Next Issue

ULTIMATE PURPOSE

A Parable of Perfection

By WALTER KUBILIUS and FLETCHER PRATT



Spinner Perkins

*thought impersonating a
space-ship psychiatrist was
a cinch — until he learned there
was a lunatic aboard!*

TEMPORARY

THE tractor taxi slithered to a stop in the shadow of the towering space liner *Scarlet Arrow*. A moment later Spinner Perkins emerged into the bone-chilling Martian dawn.

A thin breeze chopped half-heartedly at the red desert sand. Hunching his shoulders against the cold he clapped his respirator over his nose.

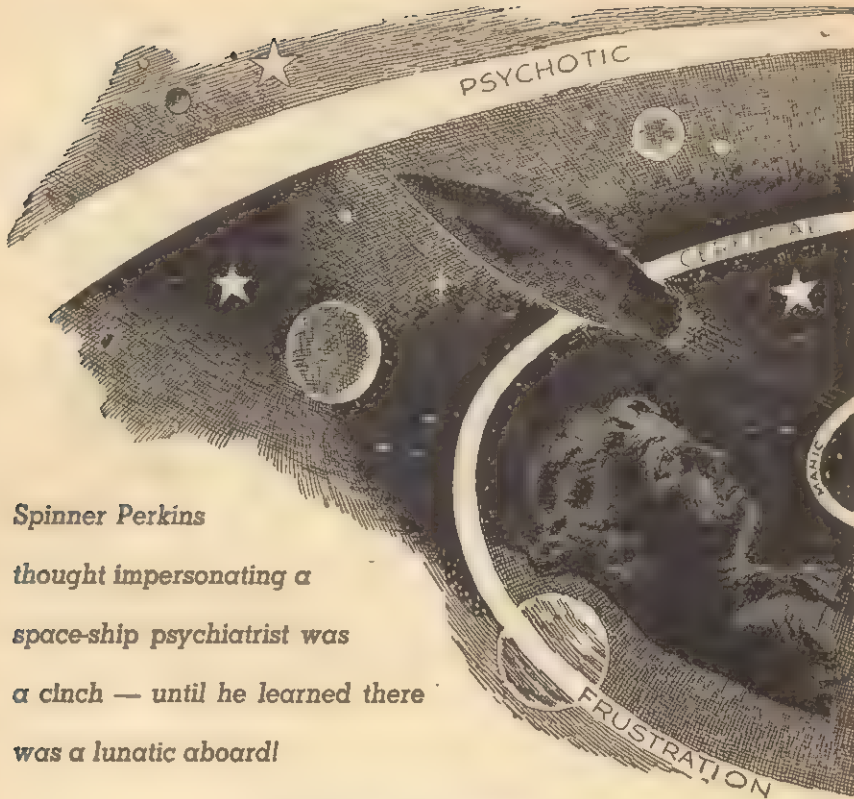
"What a hole!" he grumbled. "Why did I get *that* drunk?"

The treads of the taxi threw up little

puffs of sand as the machine turned and waddled back toward the limits of the landing field. Spinner watched it miserably, feeling like five and a half feet of jettisoned trash, knowing this was his last likely hope of getting off Mars. The domes of the Earth colony over on the canal glinted icily beyond the trail of sand raised by another approaching taxi. "Looked a lot different the other day," he told himself.

Two days ago there had been crowds

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KEEPER

A Novelet by H. B. FYFE

in the air-polo stadium to watch Spinner and his barnstorming mates from Earth end their exhibition tour. There had been gasps as the midget jets hurtled after the silvery balloon, dribbled it against the ground or steel net or clashed in reckless blocks that kept the penalty net filled. Especially, Spinner remembered, there had been rousing cheers when he had squeezed between two defending jets to punch across the winning goal.

Plenty of reason to celebrate, it had seemed, even though the team had to hold to a tight schedule to catch their space liner.

The other tractor taxi was near—he knew he had better see if he could get aboard *this* rocket. If they threw him off he might not make it to Earth for the current league campaign. If that happened, he wondered, would O'Hara really sell him to the minors? His broad lightly-freckled face tightened.



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in the air-polo stadium to watch Spinner and his barnstorming mates from Earth end their exhibition tour. There had been gasps as the midget jets hurtled after the silvery balloon, dribbled it against the ground or steel net or clashed in reckless blocks that kept the penalty net filled. Especially, Spinner remembered, there had been rousing cheers when he had squeezed between two defending jets to punch across the winning goal.

Plenty of reason to celebrate, it had seemed, even though the team had to hold to a tight schedule to catch their space liner.

The other tractor taxi was near—he knew he had better see if he could get aboard *this* rocket. If they threw him off he might not make it to Earth for the current league campaign. If that happened, he wondered, would O'Hara really sell him to the minors? His broad lightly-freckled face tightened.

He slogged across the short stretch of sand to the ship's ladder, hoping his story would hold up until he was safely in space. In the sane discouraging light of the morning it struck him as being rather flimsy.

"I shall never return to space!" the little man had said in the bar near the canal last night. "It is utterly abhorrent! I shall doff this shabby livery and remain on Mars—"

"Space liner officer?" Spinner had asked, thinking of the dearth of space in the few remaining rockets scheduled to leave before the position of Earth became unfavorable.

"Never again!"

"I wish I could change places with you," Spinner had murmured wistfully.

NEVER had he expected the little man to take him seriously. As he paused now at the foot of the ladder he almost regretted his rashness. Even the ship's name, *Scarlet Arrow*, seemed grim.

"Come on, Spinner," he tried to convince himself. "His heart wasn't in it. The ship wouldn't have been safe with him at the controls."

He tugged at his single bag of possessions and prepared to mount the ladder. A snorting and clanking behind him caused him to glance over his shoulder as the next tractor taxi churned up.

The wind snatched at the cloud of sand puffed up by the treads and blasted it stingingly into his face. Spinner gasped and began to claw at his eyes. His feet became tangled with his suitcase and he sprawled on the seat of his pants.

"Here, try my handkerchief." An amused voice interrupted his ensuing remarks.

Spinner shut his mouth abruptly despite the grit lodged between his teeth. He stopped rubbing with his sand-covered hands in favor of using the wisp of linen that was thrust into his grasp. Regaining some degree of vision he peered up—then down, then up again.

He was very favorably impressed. She was slim beneath her furs, dark-haired and her black eyes glistened with laughter. Spinner was inclined to forgive the latter because she appeared to be only five feet three or four.

He scrambled to his feet, managing to knock over one of the two traveling bags that stood beside her. The tractor taxi churned away but a gust blew the sand in another direction.

"I'm Anne Gibbs," said the girl. She repossessed the handkerchief and dabbed at the side of his face. "Thought I'd miss the flight. My father would be furious. As his secretary I'm carrying all his notes."

Spinner straightened up to his full height. Yes, she was about five feet three. Just right. He was glad that the former spaceman had also been short. His black uniform, save for a tightness across the shoulders, was a reasonable fit.

"My name's Sp—James Perkins. I guess you're wondering now if it's safe to go into space with me," he apologized.

She laughed and he picked up her luggage, deciding that if his drinking companion had been anything higher than a third pilot he would plead a misunderstanding in the phone call that had arranged the substitution.

They were met at the top of the ladder by a saturnine steward, who summoned a younger crewman to take charge of the passenger and her luggage.

Spinner identified himself and was led in the opposite direction.

"Perkins? Yes, sir—we had a message about you," said the steward, stopping before a door on the main corridor. "I'm Jones, sir, and here are your quarters."

He slid the door open to reveal a small office furnished with a desk, swivel chair, leather-covered couch and a number of bookcases with wire-mesh doors to keep the volumes in place. A desk lamp cast a soft glow on bulkheads of soothing green. There was

even a rug of neutral color on the deck.

"Cabin and head through that door," said the steward, pointing. "Sorry, sir, but I'll have to leave. Take-off is in a very few minutes. I'll report you aboard."

When Jones had departed the new ship's officer made for the cabin. He knew better than to be caught away from his bunk during the worst of the acceleration.

"They sure do themselves well on this line," he murmured, stretching himself on the bunk and noticing the bookcase built into the bulkhead beside it.

Mars to experience any space fears.

He started to roll out of the bunk with some vague idea of regaining the liberty of the Martian desert but there was a thunder of rockets transmitted dully through the deck. Spinner sank back as the acceleration made itself felt.

"I'm in for it now!" he reflected.

IN the hours that followed, the ship rose from the surface without mishap. There were a few corrective bursts as the ruddy disk of Mars shrank beyond the tail. For these and the time they

Athletes of the Future

THE role of the athlete in any civilization is an anomalous one. Basically he is a sort of sublimated soldier—yet as such he can thrive only in cultures of which war is not a staple. They had athletes in Cnossos—but not in Egypt. In Athens but not in Sparta. In Rome—but not among the Gauls, Goths, Huns or Vandals. And so on right down to the present, where athletes flourish in England and America but not behind the so-called Iron Curtain.

Because he is superficially useless to any society unmuscular "brains" tend to regard the trained physical performer with contempt. Yet the athlete is as much a symptom of a civilization at its peak as are mammoth engineering and philosophical attainments. For the athlete is the toy soldier of the man of good will—enabling him to work off his antisocial impulses vicariously and safely from a colosseum seat.

Some of us, prone to such meanderings, have wondered now and again as to what will be the role of the athlete in an interplanetary future. Mr. Fyfe has done more than wonder—he has given us what might well be a locker-room topper of times to come.

THE EDITOR.

He turned on the reading light and scanned some of the titles as a warning bell sounded throughout the ship. The taste of the previous occupant had run to thick intellectual volumes, all seemingly concerned with one subject.

Certain Problems of Cerebral Control, he read. *Frustration and Aggression in Psychodynamics*, *Some Analyses of Psychotic Behavior*, *Diagnosing the Psychopathic Personality* . . . "Hot jets! He didn't tell me he was the ship's psychiatrist!"

He knew the better liners were beginning to carry them but he and his teammates had had too gay a trip to

required Spinner was grateful. He planned to delay appearing in public as long as possible.

He spent some idle moments rooting through his predecessor's desk for notes and hints on procedure. Just as he thought he was catching a glimmering of the jargon he heard a knock.

Spinner froze in a guilty attitude over the desk. Then, as the door slid back and a black-uniformed officer entered, the new "psychiatrist" straightened to a belligerent erectness.

"I'm Joe De Rosa, the chief pilot," said the newcomer pleasantly. His glance sharpened for an instant. "Say

—haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

The impostor's heart sank. Six or seven years earlier, De Rosa had been a hot-shot player in his own league. There was no mistaking the lean-jawed tanned face, the even white smile, the sleepy eyes. Surely De Rosa, having retired from the game with a fortune, must still follow it enough to know something about the newer players coming up.

"I don't think so," Spinner answered slowly, determined to brazen it out as far as he could.

"Well, no matter. The Old Man told me to bring you to dinner. Wants to have a squint at you, I suppose."

"I *did* come on short notice," admitted Spinner. He slid open a small closet and chose a fresh tunic he hoped would fit. "Is he particular about head-doc-tors?"

"Doesn't believe in them," grinned De Rosa. "Neither does Doc Lebrun, the standard medico."

Spinner breathed a sigh of relief and unzipped his tunic. "Easy money then," he said for De Rosa's benefit.

"Lucky you! Say—" The sleepy eyes widened a fraction at the sight of Spinner's bull-like torso. "I thought at first you were a little fellow but you have muscles like a gorilla!"

Spinner caught himself just before explaining how useful that was in absorbing air-polo shocks. After he dressed they walked together to the dining salon.

"Tell me," ventured Spinner on the way, "do you generally have many passengers wanting to consult—"

He stopped, open-mouthed. De Rosa had abruptly bolted down a side passage into which he had glanced as they passed.

Spinner gaped after the pilot, who was making phenomenal speed in the light artificial gravity. He was struck by something in the set of the pilot's shoulders that drew him into pursuit.

Hope he isn't violent—I didn't get to that chapter yet, he thought.

Catching up to the other near the end of the passage he saw smoke curling from a slot in the bulkhead. It was a door that had not been slid completely shut.

De Rosa yanked it open and thrust his head inside. "Fire alarm on the bulk-head," he snapped over his shoulder. "Punch it—no, wait a minute!"

He plunged inside, emerged a second later with a smoking suitcase. "Go left!" he yelled. "Open doors ahead of me!"

Spinner pivoted and left the spot like a jet. With De Rosa shouting signals from behind they tore through three sliding doors, another passageway, a small office and wound up in the galley.

"Gangway to the chute!" bawled the pilot.

Spinner was vaguely aware of the steward and another white-coated figure scurrying aside. He dodged after them, saw De Rosa dive with his smouldering burden into a small recess.

A sweeping motion of the pilot's hand opened a section of bulkhead to reveal a disposal lock. Another whirled the suitcase into it. A moment later, with the inner portal safely reclosed, it was ejected into space.

De Rosa stepped back, straightening his cap. "Keep this quiet, boys," he said to the goggling onlookers.

Spinner had the impression, as the pressure of De Rosa's hand on his elbow guided him out, that they *would* keep it quiet. The tall pilot obviously had their respect and liking.

"I'll tell you more when I find whose cabin that was."

"A fire could be pretty bad, couldn't it?" asked Spinner, thinking of the limited amount of oxygen contained within the hull.

"It sure could! That's why I want a word with you after chow."

II

THEY reached the saloon, which held about half the thirty-odd passengers at a time. Spinner saw by the furnishings

that it could be converted to a lounge at other times. Rockets still had enough limitations on room to enforce a staggering of some activities. He fervently hoped that everyone slept at the same time.

Captain Bruce Malcom struck him immediately as being a plump pink-faced stuffed-shirt. He was around forty-five, near the age limit for space-captains, and his mouse-colored hair was mostly absent. Spinner discovered to his chagrin that the commander was one infuriating inch taller.

"Perkins? Carrot-top, eh?" said Malcom, glancing at Spinner's sandy-red hair. "Our Chief Rocketman is a red-head too. But Swensen would make two of you—eh, Doc?"

Sleek gray-haired Doctor Lebrun agreed with a coldly affable smile. Spinner hated the pair of them.

He found a place at De Rosa's table and was pleased to find Anne Gibbs there. The pilot introduced him to the others.

Anne's father, a lean dignified gentleman with a thin black mustache, was famous as an expert on non-Terran diseases. Spinner realized that his daughter-secretary must have earned her right to accompany him on this research trip.

The small intense man with the challenging nose was Neptune d'Abagnanti, a theatrical producer. His statuesque and very blond discovery, introduced by the unlikely name of Dawn Blushe, threw the remaining couple completely in the shade. Mr. and Mrs. Crandall were big-business folk with pudgy faces and personalities, rendered unexpectedly shy by the picturesque qualities of their dining companions.

The actress eyed Spinner speculatively. He sighed. She was considerably too tall. "So you're the head-doctor?" she murmured. "Get much business on a trip like this?"

Spinner had an odd feeling of being toyed with. Only that made him welcome Mrs. Crandall's sudden enthusiasm.

"Oh, *do* tell us some of your interesting cases, Doctor!" she cooed.

"Well—they're mostly run of the mill," he answered deprecatingly. "I have to keep them confidential anyway."

"But even if you disguise the names? I think psychology is so fascinating!"

It probably is, thought Spinner helplessly.

"Sure," urged Dawn. "Tell us a couple good ones—*Doc!*"

Spinner, caught making a mental note to read up on some case histories for table conversation, was not quite sure the actress's tone was sarcastic. He shrugged.

"There is seldom much to tell," he improvised. "Most people who are—er—emotionally disturbed on a space-flight merely need—ah—reassurance of some kind."

He thought to himself that that sounded pretty good. "Emotionally disturbed" was right down the middle in flashy style and "reassurance" was a good word to remember too.

"Sure," said d'Abagnanti. "It's an art. You gotta have a feeling for it—right, Doc? Like me—when I look over a big number for a show. You can't make up rules for what'll go over big an' what won't. You gotta have a feelin' for it!"

Spinner seized gratefully upon this unexpected ally and spent the rest of the meal doggedly dragging the conversation back to art and the theater despite his scanty knowledge of both subjects.

Eventually he escaped and returned to his quarters. As he was entering, he heard his name called.

"I want a word with you," said De Rosa, hurrying up, "before I take my watch in the control room."

Inside the office they faced each other. The pilot seemed uneasy. Spinner hoped fervently that he was not confronted by his first case.

"I don't know exactly how to put this, Perkins," said the other slowly. "The fact is—someone on this rocket has been pulling some crazy tricks."

Having for once nothing to say, Spinner maintained an inquiring silence. De Rosa began to pace the cabin. "I thought at first it might have been little O'Connor, the one you replaced. But he's gone now and things still happen."

Spinner was forced to break the silence with, "What things?"

"Oh—little accidents. that look like oversights—that shouldn't be very serious—but *could* be deadly if they weren't caught in time. That fire, for instance—and some of the astrogation instruments I found slightly out of adjustment—just enough to miss Earth by a million miles."

"But would anyone deliberately do something like that?"

De Rosa flung him a sharp glance. "I'd imagine *you* could think of a number of types. Myself—I think it's somebody with a good knowledge of the ship and a short circuit between the ears to keep him from caring what happens."

"Or makes him *want* it to happen," said Spinner thoughtfully. "Whose cabin was it?"

"The Crandalls'. They say none of their luggage is missing."

"I—I'll keep my eyes open," Spinner promised reluctantly.

"That's all I want," De Rosa assured him. "You'd be more likely to spot a type like that than I would."

He departed and Spinner hastened over to the bookcases to seek a text that would enlighten him.

BEFORE getting into the professional air-polo league he had stretched his dwindling bankroll as far as an engineering degree on Earth. He still had the terms of theoretical rocket engineering on the tip of his tongue although he had spent the last three years in the midget jets to acquire a quick stake—but it would hardly do for him to produce them in conversation. What he needed now was a cram session to rehearse a psychological vocabulary.

"The basic text is what I really need," he told himself. "But will I have the

time? I'd better dig right into the abnormal lingo. That's what the audience expects."

There seemed to be no book dealing specifically with disorders induced by space travel. Spinner hoped that it was a comparatively restricted field, which would permit him to be somewhat original.

He stacked some volumes on his desk, leaned back in the swivel chair and looked for a place to prop his feet. The desk top seemed too neat, so he considered the head of the leather couch to his right. The significance of that article of furniture finally struck him.

"So *that's* what it's for!" he exclaimed, realizing that his first impression of luxury had been ill-founded.

He rose and tried the couch, finding it comfortable. Lying back on it necessitated his turning his back to the desk but he still had enough light to read. He opened his book.

He skipped through chapter headings and definitions of the main mental disorders, then began to search for case history examples in smaller print. "Gotta have something to talk about," he reasoned, "or they'll take me for a fake right away."

He read for some time about paranoid, hysterical, compulsive and other aberrations until his eyebrows acquired a permanent arch. There was a knock at his door. When it was repeated he stirred and called, "Come in!"

The door slid back and he found Dawn Blushe regarding him with a blue baby-stare. She was dressed now in a slack suit of shiny black that highlighted every tight spot—of which there were a good many more than seemed strictly necessary. Under the bolero jacket her thin blouse of electric blue set off more than her glowing hair.

"Givin' yourself a li'l treatment, Doc?" she drawled.

Spinner snapped up to a sitting position, dropped his book and made that an excuse to get off the couch.

"Come in," he repeated. "What can

"I do for you?"

Dawn grinned tantalizingly but slid the door shut and advanced to the opposite side of the desk. "That depends—Doc. Guess we oughta have a li'l talk."

Spinner realized he had to look up at her no matter how straight he stood and was accordingly displeased. He invited her to sit down, perhaps more abruptly than he intended.

"Sure—Doc," the actress agreed amiably. "Don't see any chairs 'cept yours, so I guess I belong on the old couch, hnnh?"

She sprawled out lazily. Spinner wondered whose nerves were more affected. He restrained an impulse to remark how well she belonged there.

"I just slipped away from Neptune," said Dawn, squirming slightly to get her shoulders comfortable. "I wanted words with you—Doc."

"Well, now," said Spinner heartily, "I'm sure there can't be anything bothering a pretty girl like you that can't be fixed in a hurry."

Dawn propped herself up on one elbow and measured him with an innocent stare. "I sure hope there ain't, Perky," she drawled.

Spinner coughed to hide a grimace. "Perky" sounded so—so *bantamweight*. He had encountered it many times—but its use had generally cost someone a bruise.

"I—uh—I'd rather you didn't call me that, exactly."

"Don't like bein' called Perky?" Dawn's big blue eyes were astonished. "What then—*Doctor Perkins*?"

"It might be better, considering the relation between doctor and—ah . . ."

He groped for a word that would not suggest abnormality. It was probably not best to remind a patient of her condition. He realized that he had been staring fixedly at the electric blue blouse and hastily averted his glance.

"Of course," he plunged on, "I want you to think of me as a friend—someone you can trust."

"I bet you do!" murmured Dawn.

"What?" demanded Spinner, peering sharply at her lowered eyelids.

"Okay—Doc, but let's not get *too* chummy. There ain't gonna be any—operations—in here."

Spinner straightened up instinctively, blinking.

"You see," continued Dawn, sliding down again and folding her hands imperturbably under the back of her neck, "I happen to remember who you are, Spinner. I saw that game the other day."

III

SPINNER shot to his feet so abruptly that the swivel chair cracked loudly against the desk.

"I thought you were real cute, buzzin' over the judges' box when you broke the scorin' record with that last goal."

He licked his suddenly dry lips and glanced desperately about. *Anyone* might happen in and hear this. He scurried around the corner of his desk to the door and locked it. Dawn bit her full red lower lip and rolled her eyes upward in mock dismay.

"What *will* the passengers think—*Doctor*? What will they *say*—specially that li'l brunette doll you couldn't keep your eyes off at dinner?"

"Now, look, Dawn—Miss Blushe—"

"Jenny Rourke to friends, and people I feel I can trust—like I can trust you, Perky."

"I would *rather* you didn't call me—"

"All right, all right!" She grinned. "Maybe you better keep callin' me Dawn too, at least till I get the Rourke legally changed to d'Abagnanti."

Spinner sat down slowly. "Oh! So that's it!"

"That's it, Spinner. He's a li'l hard to pin down."

"But why come to me?"

"Well, he is kinda inclined to be jealous. He's not gonna like waitin' around while I'm in here alone with you, baring all the secrets of my childhood or whatever goes on in these places."

"Look here!" said Spinner sternly. "I can't afford to get in a row over you just at the moment. I have to lie low around here. Some other time it would be a pleasure."

Dawn grinned and acknowledged the compliment with a nod. "There don't have to be any trouble," she said. "I figure Neptune'll get curious enough to come see you for his-own peace of mind."

"I begin to think he might need to with you after him. What do I do then?"

"I'll leave that up to you—doctor," answered Dawn, pulling herself lazily to a sitting posture. "Just slip in a few hints about married life bein' what he needs—you know, companionship, settlin' down an' all that."

Spinner rose and thoughtfully paced over to the door. He unlocked it and slid it open a few inches lest he arouse suspicion unnecessarily, then returned to his desk. He leaned on the corner.

"Well, I'll do what I can," he promised doubtfully. "I hope he doesn't find out about this."

"Don't worry," Dawn assured him. "He won't."

At the knock on the door, Spinner automatically called out an invitation to enter.

Dawn rose and stretched gracefully, just as the door slid all the way open and Anne looked in. Something about the sharpness of her glance made Spinner suspect that his last remark had been overheard.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt," apologized the black-haired girl.

"Don't go—I was just leaving," said Dawn hospitably. She tucked in the electric blue blouse where her stretching had puffed it loose and raised a graceful hand to pat Spinner's blushing cheek. "Our li'l talk's gonna do me a lot of good, Doc. He's somethin' to hear, honey, so you listen to what he tells you!"

Her black slacks gleamed across the office and into the hall. There she paused with a wink and slid the door shut. Anne, standing just inside the portal, turned a somber gaze on Spinner.

The latter cleared his throat, fumbled along the edge of his desk with suddenly sticky fingers and inquired weakly if she would not like to sit down.

Anne eyed the couch darkly. "I don't think I'll stay," she said. "My father wanted to know if you'd care for a game of chess. I'll tell him you're—hard at work."

"No, wait!" said Spinner desperately. He thought of his research. "That is—I do have some things to do but let me walk back to the lounge with you at least."

ANNE shrugged slightly. "I can find it. I'm a big girl now."

"So I see," replied Spinner bitterly. "You'll probably make it all the way on one hop the way you jump to conclusions!"

She raised one eyebrow at him in a manner vaguely reminiscent of Dawn Blushe, glanced again at the couch and opened the door.

Spinner trailed along to the lounge without, apparently, regaining any standing in her regard. There were perhaps a dozen of the passengers loafing about, among whom he noticed the uniforms of Dr. Lebrun and one of the younger pilots.

Anne sat down to a game of chess with her father, which removed both of them from conversation. Spinner pretended interest in the match for a time to avoid the inviting glances of Mrs. Crandall and her bridge players. He suspected them of yearning to pry out of him psychiatric wisdom he did not have to spare.

Anne mousetrapped an invading knight so thoroughly that Dr. Gibbs conceded the loss and assumed the defensive. Spinner decided sourly that she played entirely too well for a girl. Even her father seemed astonished at being hurled back, as if unaccustomed to such stiff opposition.

Spinner became aware of turned heads. He glanced up in time to see De Rosa threading his way toward the op-

posite exit from the lounge. The pilot was moving with some dispatch and Spinner wondered if anything were wrong. Excusing himself with a murmured word—that was completely ignored, he left Dr. Gibbs to his fate and followed De Rosa.

Beyond the exit he caught one glimpse of the pilot's black uniform disappearing through a door that led to the working sections of the ship. He hesitated to the door and went through.

There was no one in sight. He hesitated as to which way to turn, having only the vaguest idea of the layout.

Let's see, he reflected, what would be back here? The rocket room and a generator compartment at least. Oh, yes, they carry escape rockets back here somewhere, not that I know what good they'd be if anything really happened!

He walked slowly along one of the narrow side-passages. Thinking he had heard voices he paused to listen beside a door. The metal portal was abruptly whipped aside.

Spinner started back at the sight of the red-headed giant who confronted him, hefting a heavy wrench in one brawny fist. The man was well over six feet but so powerfully proportioned that he hardly looked five-nine. He wore stained dungarees and a faded tattoo, the latter showing dully through the fuzz of his forearm. Little trickles of sweat ran among the glinting stubble on his jaw and the curly red hairs on his chest.

"It's all right, Olé," said a familiar voice.

Spinner saw De Rosa behind the giant and breathed again.

"Come on in," said the pilot. "This is Doc Perkins, the new psycho. Doc—Chief Rocketman Swensen."

"Pleasure," muttered Spinner.

Swensen regarded him with dour suspicion but shifted the wrench to his left hand and held out his big paw. Spinner grasped it with exceeding firmness to atone for the fact that he was developing a crick in the neck from trying to

look Swensen in the eye.

There was a moment of silent struggle, during which Swensen's white eyebrows rose, lending him an air of amazement. In the end he let go first but Spinner had to admit to himself that the rocketman had given as good as he had received.

"Thought ya was a snooper," said Swensen.

"Yeah," interjected De Rosa. "We're all a little nervous. Almost had a slip-up here."

"I saw you zooming through the lounge," said Spinner. "What happened?"

"I saw by a repeater gauge in the control room that the pressure in this section was going down."

"Dam' good t'ing!" added Swensen, nodding toward where two of his mechanics were welding one of the many valve-studded pipe lines passing through the compartment. "Some dam' jolt-head jammed a fuel outlet!"

"A duct used to clear the tanks," explained De Rosa. "But instead of leaving it connected with the fuel he busted the fitting just enough to let air slow-leak from this compartment into the outlet line."

"By accident?"

"What do *you* think?" asked De Rosa with a significant glance.

"You come lookin' fer Mr. De Rosa, huh?" demanded Swensen suddenly.

"That's right," said Spinner.

"Dja know where this compartment was?"

"No," Spinner answered, looking the rocketman carefully in the eye. "I came this way by luck. If you hadn't yanked open the door I'd have gone on past."

"He's okay," insisted De Rosa gently.

"Yeah, I guess so," sighed Swensen.

"It's just that it gets on yer nerves after awhile. Ya walk a tightrope out here in the middle o' nothin' where one slip could fix ya good. So when ya *nearly* slip eight 'r ten times runnin' ya begin to wonder how long ya can get away with it!"

DE ROSA clapped him on a muscular shoulder, told him to keep his eyes open and left with Spinner.

"Listen!" said the pilot as they walked forward. "I want you to do me a favor."

"What?" asked Spinner.

De Rosa looked along the passageway to make sure they were alone. "This is getting out of hand," he muttered with a worried jerk of the head toward the compartment they had just left. "I've known all the crew but you since we left Earth and I can't tell who's doing it. It's up to you!"

"What?"

"*Ssssh!* I mean you've got to get around and talk to all of them. You might be able to spot the symptoms if anybody's off his curve—and that's where we have to look because none of the passengers is a round-tripper."

Spinner licked his lips, groping for a likely excuse. "It might be harder than it seems," he said lamely.

"Why?" asked De Rosa.

Spinner looked hard at him to make sure he was in earnest. "Well—ah—" He had an inspiration. "One natural fear of such a person would be that of discovery. Therefore he would try to disguise his condition."

There! he thought. *Not only does it sound good but it also ought to get me off the hook.*

The other unhappily accepted the statement without objection but exacted before they parted a promise that Spinner would at least try.

Feeling hemmed in the latter returned to his cabin to start a late cram session. This time, however, he found himself falling asleep on the couch. He rose in disgust and stumbled to his bunk. His hectic life of the past week, especially since he had struck this "soft" berth, took its toll. He slept right through both breakfast shifts.

"Huh?" he responded blearily to a hand that was shaking his shoulder gently.

He peered along the white sleeve up

past a shoulder and made out the saturnine features of Jones, the steward.

"You missed breakfast, Mr. Perkins, so I brought you a tray.

"Well!" Spinner heaved himself up hungrily. "That's damned nice of you. Is it part of the standard service here?"

"It very definitely is *not*, sir, and I shall thank you not to spread any reports of it."

"Oh?" Spinner grinned, accepting the tray. There was a tall glass of orange juice that tasted remarkably like the real thing. He downed it at one thirsty gulp before attacking the cereal.

"It's just that any friend of Mr. De Rosa's is in good standing with us. We saw you on the job last night."

"Thanks a lot," said Spinner as the steward moved toward the door to the office.

"Enjoy it, sir," encouraged Jones. "It may never happen again before you get to Earth."

Spinner winked and one or two wrinkles around the steward's mouth twitched in return. He went through the door but returned almost immediately.

"One of the passengers, sir, a Mrs. Crandall, wants to know if you can give her some time."

Spinner set down his coffee cup reluctantly. He considered coldly whether he could get away with it. At least Mrs. Crandall ought not be too hard to handle. A few long words, a confidential air and a nice smile should serve.

"Ask her to come by in about fifteen minutes," he directed.

IV

BY THE end of the quarter-hour he had showered, shaved, crammed his bull-like shoulders into a pressed tunic and planted himself professionally behind his desk.

Mrs. Crandall was prompt in arriving but rather long-winded and coy about getting to the point. It developed that she had been having horrible dreams.

"I was just floating there in black empty space," she complained, perching gingerly on the edge of the couch. "First I thought there were stars all around. Then they turned into *eyes*—millions of eyes everywhere—watching every move I made!"

"I see," said Spinner judiciously. "Just make yourself comfortable and tell me all about it."

Mrs. Crandall lay back with a self-conscious giggle. He got up, walked around his desk, picked up a large notebook. Pausing beside a bookcase he slid the wire front back and scanned the titles frantically for inspiration.

One caught his eye. It was a thick volume entitled *Twenty-four Histories of Non-directive Counseling*.

"I'm not really surprised," said Mrs. Crandall. "This is only my second space-trip and I just *knew* I wouldn't get any sleep."

Spinner grunted noncommittally as he pulled out the book. Mrs. Crandall showed signs of heaving herself around to see if he had deserted her. He hastily slipped the text between the pages of his notebook and returned to his chair behind the head of the couch.

"But what bothers me is this constant feeling of depression that lasts all day," continued Mrs. Crandall. "Is that bad, Doctor? And I worry so about some accident to the ship. That young Mr. De Rosa practically hinted that something could happen."

"Perhaps he had his reasons," murmured Spinner, opening the volume behind the screen of his notebook.

"I am certain he was just trying to impress us with his own importance," declared Mrs. Crandall. "I intend to have Mr. Crandall speak firmly to him."

Spinner found an interesting passage in the introduction.

The therapist's chief aim should be to create a warm friendly, "permissive" atmosphere which will encourage the patient to go on and express his feelings further. Under the non-directive system his aim is not even to attempt diagnosis but rather to listen patiently for a sufficient time so

that the patient may achieve some insight into his own difficulties.

In other words, thought Spinner, let 'em weep on your shoulder till they begin to realize what long ears they have.

The technique is considerably more difficult than it might seem, the temptation for the therapist to inject his own opinions and remarks becoming at times nearly irresistible. . . .

Not to me, brother! decided Spinner. *This is just the out I've been looking for. If I can't keep my big mouth shut for fifteen or twenty minutes—*

"You are listening, aren't you, Doctor?" asked Mrs. Crandall suspiciously.

"Yes, of course," said Spinner hastily. "I was just trying to—ah—visualize your problem. Go right ahead, please."

"Well, as I was saying, I feel so—so lost—and unsure of myself. I never was reconciled to making a trip through space in the first place."

"I see," said Spinner, attempting to sound understanding and "permissive."

"It was Mr. Crandall who wanted to go—who had to go on very important business. Of course, I couldn't let him go all alone."

"Naturally not."

"Not only the danger and hardships," said Mrs. Crandall, apparently quite forgetting her comfortable cabin, "but someone has to watch the sort of people who try to be friendly with an important man."

"Oh, yes," agreed Spinner.

"Women especially. I always say it takes a woman to know another woman. One good look will tell her more than a man could figure out in years."

"Yes, so I've been told."

"Now, for instance, you take that little Miss Gibbs."

"Yes, indeed! Uh—*harumph!*"

"Now, I could tell immediately that her father did not bring her up to be a lady."

SPINNER could not quite manage to make a comforting sympathetic sound in answer to that.

"Oh, I admit," conceded Mrs. Crandall, "that she's a nice enough little thing and rather pretty in a way. She's always been polite. But she's entirely too self-sufficient and smart. Did you see her pretending to be intellectual and playing chess yesterday?"

"I see what you mean," agreed Spinner with a bit of warmth as he reflected upon Anne's self-sufficiency.

"And then there's that gawky tramp that calls herself Dawn Blushe!"

As Mrs. Crandall paused to sniff Spinner feared he was about to be embarrassed by a frank womanly analysis. He hastened to divert the conversation, wincing mentally as he recalled the "irresistible temptation" to "inject one's own opinions."

"I understand how you must feel about watching your—er—watching over your husband, Mrs. Crandall. Quite right. Now, about the dreams and the lost feeling?"

He wondered if these emotions were the result of an unconscious guilt at being imbedded so comfortably in the upper financial crust or whether the current anxiety could be traced back to a childhood incident. Perhaps both, he decided, making up his mind to ask a real psychiatrist someday.

He listened at some length to an exposition of Mrs. Crandall's woes. She sounded to Spinner like a child whining to be held by the hand. He tried to tell himself that his attitude was entirely too unsympathetic and selfishly hard. If it should show through it would give his game away and he would find himself in the galley or rocket room instead of occupying this comfortable suite.

He realized with a slight shock that the well had at last run dry—for the time being.

"... and so, I decided I simply *had* to find someone to talk to. I was overjoyed when I found out that the *Scarlet Arrow* had a gentleman like you to handle such problems."

Nobody can really handle your problem but yourself, Chubby, Spinner

thought but contented himself with saying smugly. "We are always glad to be of help if we can."

He could not for the life of him think of any advice to give her, and was wondering if he could get away with "considering her case further." It might work, flattering her yearning for importance. After all, he could not remember ever having been told the story of an uncomplicated operation. Everyone wanted to be a special case.

"Oh, you can and you have, Doctor," Mrs. Crandall was saying warmly. "You have absolutely done me a *world* of good already. I just *know* I shall feel *much*, much better after a few more of these talks."

Spinner swallowed and strove to rally his wits. "Of course, of course," he heard himself gibbering amiably. "Just keep your spirits up. I'm sure a determined woman like yourself can do that if she sets her mind to it. Time enough for these worries when you reach middle age!"

He felt his stomach turning over at his own duplicity but managed to usher Mrs. Crandall out the door—not, however, before weakening enough to put her name down for another consultation. He staggered back to his chair to think it over.

"I don't get it!" he muttered to himself. "I sat there and hardly opened my yap—but she says I did her a lot of good. Maybe there is something to that system, at that!"

He fumbled for the textbook he had dropped to the desk.

... to listen patiently for a sufficient time so that the patient may achieve some insight into his own difficulties ...

The technique is considerably more difficult than it might seem ...

Spinner rose and stood for a long moment with his finger-tips resting on the edge of his desk. He glowed with a heady sense of power.

"This racket isn't as hard as you'd think," he told himself. "Why stop at merely getting away with the substitu-

tion? Another watch at those textbooks and I needn't be afraid to sound off to anybody aboard."

After all it was made to order. Anyone with a modicum of patience could let them cry on his shoulder. If some doubter demanded definite information he could just say he did not believe in that way of doing things. That old saying had a lot of wisdom in it—keep your eyes open and your mouth shut!

"If I don't say anything at all," he reasoned, "except 'hmmm,' or 'uh-huh' or 'I see'—how can I put my foot in it?"

He patted the cover of the book fondly. "Let's go, Spinner!" he chuckled. "It's time we ran out for a few minutes and analyzed the crew for De Rosa!"

He walked forward through unfamiliar territory. At the far end of his corridor he paused to peer through a glass window set head-high in the door. The compartment beyond seemed to be the control room. He slid back the door and stepped inside.

ONE of De Rosa's juniors—Reilly, he thought—was sprawled in the seat at the main control board. He appeared to have nothing more to do in mid-space than to glance occasionally at the instrument panel to see if any stray bits of matter had been detected ahead.

Captain Malcom sat at the astrogration desk, doodling. He did not look up for several minutes, which Spinner utilized to examine the place curiously.

It was comfortably if not fancily furnished. There were neat racks of reference books and mathematical tables. The electrical computers were of the best, the telescreens were encased in smoothly finished cabinets and the numerous auxiliary instruments were arranged in banks along the bulkheads according to an obviously efficient plan. Otherwise the room was small enough to have been unimpressive. Beside the door Spinner had come through was another that he suspected led to the observation dome.

"Oh, it's you!" grunted Malcom, looking up at last.

"Hope I'm not intruding," said Spinner, turning on his sunniest smile. "Thought I'd drop in to see what the nerve center of the ship looks like."

The pilot turned back to his dials. The set of his shoulders said plainly that gushing sightseers belonged back in the passenger sections. Malcom grunted and motioned toward a spare stool. Spinner pulled it over near the astrogration desk and perched upon it.

"What's it like, running the ship from here?" he asked.

"I wouldn't know any more," grumbled Malcom with a scowl.

Spinner looked at him. The captain's face was pink, either with exasperation or with the blood pressure that might be expected from the size of the melon under his belt.

"What do you mean?" he asked, expecting some sort of wry joke.

"Didn't I tell you? This is my last space-jump. Those knotheads on Earth who make up the rules—they say I'm too old."

"Oh," said Spinner. "I didn't know."

"Forty-seven—*senile*! Afraid I might get a couple of hundred thousand miles off course in my doddering way and miss the damned planet. Cost millions in lawsuits, I suppose."

The lines around his mouth deepened unpleasantly, almost like a child about to cry.

Ohmigod! thought Spinner. *Another shoulder-weeper! This must be my day!*

"But isn't the retirement age a standard set by law?" he asked and immediately realized he was sticking his neck out.

V

MALCOM threw down the pencil and ran both hands through the traces of his mouse-colored hair.

"Oh, that's what they *tell* you!" he complained. "If they really want to keep you on there are ways. You just have to be on the 'in' with the big boys. That's what counts."

Spinner noticed Reilly sitting very quietly at his pilot's position, watching his dials with the intentness of a man determined to be overlooked.

Probably been through it all a dozen times, Spinner reflected.

"It's my own fault," the captain went on. His voice was a sort of genteel snarl, one degree removed from a whine. "I had my chance years ago. Serves me right for not taking it!"

"Hmmm," said Spinner wisely, falling back on his professional technique. He wondered how soon he could leave.

"Yes, sir!" continued Malcom. "Could have wildcatted a couple of years and had my own little space-line. Plenty of opportunities, opening up the main curves to the asteroid centers."

"I suppose so," answered Spinner mechanically.

"Would have been sitting pretty by now with the Jovian moons being explored. Trouble was I didn't have the initiative to do it. You can't get anywhere without a lot of pull or those wolves will drag you down."

"Ummmhh."

"And *now* where am I? They're dragging me down anyway! Be grounded on Earth the rest of my life—if I live it out. With luck they might give me a job as a clerk."

"I should think they could do something better for you after all these years," Spinner remarked uncomfortably.

"*Arghh!* You go down around the spaceports of Earth and I'll bet you can find retired space captains waiting on tables in the passenger restaurants. Yes, sir—waiting on tables!"

HIS little eyes glared indignantly through puffy lids as if Spinner were to blame for the indignity. Then he shrugged and let his round shoulders slump over the desk.

"Well, what's the use? If I had any of the initiative I needed years ago I'd take the short way out! Sleeping pills or something. Yes, *sir!* Be better than

hanging on for years—useless—pitied . . ."

Spinner muttered something non-committal and edged his way out, leaving Malcom glowering darkly at an in-offensive sliderule.

"Oh, well," he told himself, "the ones that always threaten suicide never really do it. But why do they all pick on me—just because of the job I'm supposed to have? Isn't *anybody* on this ship happy?"

He found himself approaching the lounge, and moderated his pace. The next thing that might happen would be for the word to get around that the ship psycho was dottier than anybody. Yet he seemed to attract these tales of woe without effort.

He paused in the empty lounge to examine his features in a mirror set into the bulkhead of imitation wood paneling. Except for a chin that thrust out a bit aggressively he saw nothing too unusual. If his sandy-red hair had been a shade more sandy and less red, if his blue eyes had been not quite so alertly bright, he would have looked like any other pleasant, colorless, freckle-faced young man. He stared himself in the eye.

"Now would I tell *you* anything about my private affairs?" he demanded of his reflection.

He heard a soft step and straightened up hastily. When he turned around, he discovered the saturnine Jones looking at him askance.

"Oh, hello, there!" said Spinner, feeling his neck heating up.

"How are you, Mr. Perkins?" replied the other politely. "I just came in to convert the place for dining. The captain generally gets around to inspect about this time."

"He didn't seem about to roam when I left him just now."

"Oh, you would be surprised, sir. Captain Malcom pops up everywhere. Seems to take an interest in every little thing."

Of course, thought Spinner. *He's*

probably on the lookout as much as De Rosa. No wonder he's down in the mouth. I'd be worried too.

THE cook and a young crewman entered to aid Jones. They detached the magnetic feet of the sofas from cutout spaces in the carpeting, moved the lightly constructed furniture to the walls, covered the bare spots with the feet of tables unfolded from recesses in the paneling.

Spinner stayed a few moments but decided their bashfulness was more due to his presence than to any mental instability. He left to seek other crew members. He wandered tailward, poking his head into one or two compartments but feeling abashed at the surprised stares of the men working there.

Like a sightseer pushing into the locker room before a game, he thought. I wouldn't like it much myself.

Had he encountered Swensen he might have thought of some excuse to be shown around. When the giant's assistant in the rocket room informed him that Swensen was off watch, however, Spinner gave it up.

"There's a lot more time before we get to Earth." Thus he consoled himself, retreating along the main corridor. He found Anne Gibbs at the entrance to the converted lounge. "Chowhound!" he accused her in a whisper.

She whirled around, then laughed as she looked at her wristwatch. "Honestly," she protested, "I had no idea it was that late. We're in the second shift anyway."

"We still have nearly an hour before they start filling the place. What about a game of checkers? We can find a spot over by that wall where the steward won't get annoyed at us."

She smiled assent. Spinner followed her to a table in the corner, thinking of the moment he had looked up with his face full of Martian desert sand and found her grinning down at him.

He pulled open the drawer in the compact game table. "What'll it be?" he

asked. "Checkers, chess—no, not that! I saw you with your father the other day!"

"Is there a deck of cards in there? We might play casino or hearts if someone else comes along."

"That sounds interesting," grinned Spinner. He fished out a deck and handed it over for Anne to shuffle.

"Psssst!"

Spinner looked around.

Dawn Blushe stood in the doorway, crooking her forefinger at him urgently.

He glanced about guiltily, then met her eye again. She waved her hand in a peremptory gesture that ordered, "Come here!" with the delicacy of a cow-elephant.

"Uh—excuse me," muttered Spinner.

He rose, sidled over to the doorway. "What do you want?" he whispered ungraciously. "Just when I—"

"I know, I know! You were making time and you were very cute, Perky. But I want to make some time too!"

"What's that to do with me?"

"Neptune's on his way to your office. He fin'ly took the hint. Now you just gotta remember our bargain an' get in there an' pitch!"

"I'm not a baseball player," Spinner reminded her coldly.

"You're not a doctor either!" retorted Dawn in a threatening undertone. She seized him by the arms. "Aw, come on, willya, Spinner! This means a lot to me!"

"Ohhh—all right! Just a minute!"

He freed himself and hurried back to the table. "I'm sorry, Anne," he apologized. "Something's come up."

"Yes, I saw her rising."

"No, no. In my office, I mean."

"I saw her rising once in there too," muttered Anne.

"Now look! I have to see somebody. It'll only take a few minutes and then I'll be back."

"Don't hurry on my account—Perky!" she snapped. "I'm going to go find that handsome steward and say 'pssst!' at him to see what happens. He

ought to be about my speed, I guess!"

She began to lay out a game of solitaire, slapping the cards down with vicious snaps of the wrist.

Spinner took one step toward the door, turned back, then looked again at Dawn, who was beginning to chew her nails and peek furtively up the corridor. He jittered indecisively on the spot for another moment before he threw up his hands and rushed out.

HE FOUND d'Abagnanti pacing uncomfortably before the door to his office, and invited the producer inside with what show of cordiality he could muster.

"This is pretty silly," said d'Abagnanti, perspiring slightly. "But Miss Hughes has been telling me about you and—and . . ."

"You thought you'd see for yourself?" suggested Spinner.

D'Abagnanti glanced at him sharply. "Er—yes. Not that I was jealous or anything, like Dawn—Miss Blushe was saying. She was just trying to pull my leg."

"And you thought you'd drop in to put it the other way around."

"Ah—yeah. Good idea, kind of, now that you mention it."

They chuckled together. Spinner wondered if his own tone sounded as false as the producer's. "Make yourself comfortable," he invited, indicating the leather couch as he moved briskly to his chair, "and tell me all about it."

Neptune d'Abagnanti perched himself gingerly on the edge of the couch. "There really isn't anything the matter —"

"Of course not," agreed Spinner heartily. "Most of us are practically normal, whatever *that* is, and might not even be consciously aware of our few problems. Just tell me all about it and then we'll see what we can make of it."

"Tell you about what?" demanded the other, raising his feet reluctantly to the couch and squirming to get his neck

into a comfortable position.

"To begin with, why did you come here? No, stay the way you are. I don't mind looking at the back of your head."

"Well—it was Dawn's—Miss Blushe's idea."

"I see."

"I think a lot of her opinion," said the producer defensively. "She's an unusual girl."

"I quite agree," said Spinner. "Make some man an—er—interesting wife!"

"Yeah. To tell the truth I got a little more than a professional interest in her. I thought that maybe—when we got back to Earth . . ."

"Naturally," said Spinner.

"Oh, on the level all the way, y'understand. I'm kind of planning to ask her soon's we land. But I have my doubts. Y'see, I was married before—three times. And always with bad luck."

Spinner sighed. "Tell me," he said, "all about it."

He listened for a little while, interjecting timely grunts or sympathetic murmurs, until d'Abagnanti got up a head of steam that seemed to carry him on his own momentum.

And I thought I had some big times after championship playoffs! reflected Spinner. *Man, I've been in the wrong racket for building an interesting social life!*

He propped his feet on a corner of the desk, leaned his chin in his left hand and scowled wearily at the back of d'Abagnanti's head. When he felt he was beginning to turn green he shifted his head to his other hand and groped over his desk with his left.

He found one of the textbooks he had put there to read, slipped it down to his lap and sneaked it open. The producer was deeply involved with his second wife and the red-head who had become his third, if Spinner had caught the line-up correctly. He sighed, said, "I see," again and turned a few pages idly.

I ought to be out among the crew, he thought. De Rosa really seemed worried. Wonder if anyone actually is

trying to spoil things?

He reviewed the people he had spoken with.

De Rosa certainly ought to be all right—but then De Rosa had been the only one to mention the trouble to Spinner. Except that the captain might be aware of it—Jones had talked about his being all around the ship and why else would he be into everything? Unless . . . ?

No, Spinner told himself firmly, Malcom was too dispirited to be up to anything. He spent the rest of his time complaining and muttering about suicide to get sympathy, so he was obviously taking his discontent out in talk.

Swensen? Possibly, he decided. The man was certainly worked up over something. Suppose he was doing it—or was he nervous from watching De Rosa and the captain? The few other crewmen Spinner had encountered had looked too busy and too normal to be up to anything.

"I see," he mouthed automatically as the droning voice paused.

VI

AS FROM a distance, he heard d'Abagnanti proceeding with the shedding of his red-head. Spinner shook off his brooding and glanced at the book.

MANIC AND DEPRESSIVE DISORDERS, read the heavy type. *Agitated Depression.*

That fits, thought Spinner. He's agitated and I'm depressed.

He read some italics further down the page.

Agitated depression is symptomized by overactivity of a restless nature, despair, continual tension and illusions featuring apprehension or self-condemnation but without serious disorganization of overt, observable behavior . . .

In other words, Spinner translated, complaining all the time and having the jitters but not enough to look actually loony. Judging by the grief I've lis-

tened to there's probably an early-stage case somewhere aboard if not a lot of them.

He turned the page and skimmed sentences here and there while d'Abagnanti droned on.

Some common themes of the delusions are hopelessness, worthlessness, personal guilt, self-reproach or dread of punishment. There is often an overwhelming personal insecurity, generalized to include family and friends and even the catastrophic destruction of the whole universe . . .

Delusional developments are commonly in keeping with the patient's self reproach . . .

Besides agitated activity delusions of self-depreciation are nearly always present. Serious personal conflicts and hostile, aggressive reactions ensue . . .

Now, who does that remind me of? Spinner asked himself.

"So, don't you think that's the thing to do, Doctor?"

"Hmmm?" He returned abruptly to the present and guessed wildly. "About marriage, you mean?"

"Yes," said d'Abagnanti, beginning to rise somewhat stiffly.

"Oh, definitely," said Spinner vaguely. "I mean—when you put it that way it all seems quite clear."

The producer gained his feet, beaming. "I gotta hand it to you, Doc," he said happily. "I didn't think much of the idea at first but you really did me a lotta good."

Spinner also rose, sliding the textbook unobtrusively onto the chair. More than anything else he ached to open it and find out what was nagging at the back of his mind. The feeling that he was on the verge of putting two and two together made him twitch with impatience.

"Quite all right," he babbled amiably. "Any time. Glad to be of help."

He gripped the edge of the desk until his knuckles were white as d'Abagnanti talked his way out the door. He kept thinking of the time he had admired the blank expression and steady hands of a professional gambler who had never

been known to show tension.

"Ah, but you should see the holes in the toes of my socks after an evening's play," the man had told him.

By the time the door slid shut behind the producer Spinner felt that his wriggling toes must have dug grooves in the soles of his shoes. Without the slightest idea as to whether or not he had carried out his bargain with Dawn he snatched up the book.

One sentence seemed to stand out as his glance swept the righthand page, and he suddenly realized of whom he had vaguely been reminded.

The greatest danger in agitated depression, but most difficult to evaluate, is that of suicide . . .

"Malcom!" he exclaimed and read on.

There is further hazard in the popular and widespread—but fallacious—*notion* that repeated threats of suicide need not be taken seriously . . .

"Oh-oh!" he gasped. "I passed that one off too easily. I wonder if he meant it after all?"

Depressed cases are very often of the belief that loved ones or associates also face the misery of the delusions they have been suffering. When they attempt self-destruction they are quite likely to include such individuals in their plans!

"That does it!" yelled Spinner, making for the door. "I want to know where he is, at least till I get control of my imagination again!"

He forced himself to keep to a normal brisk pace on his way to the control room. When he thrust his head inside he saw only Reilly.

"Where's the Captain?" he asked. Something in his tone made the pilot sit up.

"Out running around the ship again, I suppose. Sometimes he's like a chicken with its head cut off."

"Is it his watch here?"

"Why?" asked the man curiously. "He doesn't take any particular watch. Spends all his time snooping around the ship—when he isn't ear-bending about

the dirty deal he thinks he's getting."

"Oh," Spinner recalled, "that waiter's job. Tell me, is there anything to it?"

REILLY grimaced disdainfully. "Lot of bull!" was his verdict. "Wish I was in line for the kind of ground job he can get if he wants it."

"Thanks," said Spinner, withdrawing into the corridor.

"If you see De Rosa," Reilly called after him, "remind him he's due here soon. I'm getting hungry."

Spinner was already hurrying along the passageway. He went first to the dining saloon, but the captain was conspicuously absent from the first shift of diners. Reilly's words came back to him. Perhaps it would be best to get hold of De Rosa.

He retraced his steps to the chief pilot's cabin and knocked. Too impatient to wait he slid the door open and called, "De Rosa!"

There was some sort of upheaval in the darkness like the sound of thrashing blankets. A light snapped on and he saw De Rosa glaring at him, one foot feeling for the deck as he rolled out of his bunk with ready hands.

"Oh, it's you," said the pilot, relaxing. "What's up?"

"I have a hunch we ought to look up Malcom," said Spinner, wondering how to explain such a wild guess.

De Rosa nodded with the passive acceptance of one just awakened. He pulled on his clothes with rapid deftness. Only then, apparently, did he realize the suggestion.

"What?"

"Won't hurt, will it?" Spinner countered uncomfortably.

De Rosa raised the hands that had been closing the zipper of his tunic and examined them, half-surprised. "Thought there was trouble," he said. "Seems that every time I go to sleep now I wake up expecting the worst."

Spinner peered at him in sudden doubt. *No, of course not, he thought. And yet—*

He decided not to explain his motive just yet. "There's nothing I can quite put my finger on," he said cautiously. "I hear he prowls the ship all his spare time."

De Rosa raised his eyebrows. "Come to think of it," he answered, "I *have* noticed that he gets around. But then, so do I. Is there anything wrong with that?"

"Depends. I'm wondering if I could call it a restless *agitated* activity. Did you tell him what's going on?"

"Yes, of course I reported it—but he didn't seem to worry much about it."

"That's funny," Spinner said significantly. "He struck me as being a good worrier."

It was the pilot's turn to stare. He had the air of a man who senses danger without being quite convinced of the reality. "Then let's go see where he is," he said slowly, "if you think we should."

Despite this attitude of letting himself be persuaded De Rosa made good time along the corridor. Spinner, with his shorter legs, had to hustle to keep abreast.

The pilot knocked on Malcom's door. The cabin was unoccupied. They checked the dining saloon again. After that De Rosa led the way toward the tail.

He stuck his head briefly into the rocket-room. Over his shoulder Spinner caught a glimpse of Swensen directing two dungaree-clad mechanics in checking and cleaning some piece of apparatus.

"Not there," reported the pilot. "Let's buttonhole Jones and see if he knows anything."

They waited a moment in the passage between the dining saloon and the galley until the saturnine steward passed with a tray. De Rosa stopped him, and Jones tried to be helpful.

"Last time I saw him," he recalled, "was half an hour ago. He was headed for either the portside cabins or the passage to the escape rockets, I think."

They left him carrying his tray thoughtfully toward the galley and hurried in the direction indicated.

"Knock on some of these doors," said De Rosa, turning into the last longitudinal corridor.

"You'd better do it," advised Spinner, thinking of the need for haste. "They seem to like to gab with me."

DE ROSA flung him an exasperated glance but bore the brunt of the encounters. Most of the cabins were occupied but no one admitted to any knowledge of Captain Malcom's whereabouts. Not even Dr. Gibbs could help when De Rosa paused in his doorway.

Listening to this last conversation Spinner was conscious of someone behind him. He turned with a motion akin to a jump. Anne was watching from her door across the passage.

"Anne, have you seen the captain?" he asked, trying to keep the urgency from his voice.

"What are you playing now?" she demanded icily. "Follow-the-leader?"

He took a step forward but De Rosa touched his arm.

"We'd better try the other side," said the pilot, who was beginning to look worried.

Spinner thought he caught a puzzled expression in Anne's eyes but De Rosa urged him away.

They crossed the main corridor and searched along the other side of the ship without result. The first shift of diners began to straggle back from the saloon, which meant that the others would soon be taking their places.

"All right," sighed De Rosa, "we'll look around the store-rooms and the escape rockets, just to be thorough."

"Sssshh!" hissed Spinner, raising a hand.

They listened. The second time he was sure he heard a scream from the other side of the ship. De Rosa heard it too, for he sprinted off down the cross-passage with Spinner at his heels.

The cabins there had by now been

evacuated by the second shift of diners. The hurrying pair skidded to a stop and looked uncertainly about.

"James!"

It was Anne's voice, breathless but not far distant.

James—that's me! Spinner realized.

"*That way!*" exclaimed De Rosa suddenly.

They whirled to face aft as the girl staggered from the empty end of the corridor. She stopped at the sight of them and put one hand weakly out to the bulkhead.

Running up Spinner saw that her hair was disheveled and her eyes dazed. Gently he pulled her right hand away from her face. There was a reddening welt on her cheekbone.

"In there!" she said.

Spinner saw then the red-painted door through which she had come. It bore in white letters the sign *Escape Rockets* and in smaller characters, *Airtight*.

"I saw him go in before, so when you left I decided to tell him you were looking for him," said Anne.

Running footsteps sounded from the direction of the main passage. The burly Swensen skidded to a halt at the intersection exactly as they had done before him. Seeing them he approached, swinging his wrench lightly in one huge fist.

"He was there all right," continued the girl. "I don't know what he was doing at that little door but when I spoke to him—he leaped at me!"

She fingered her jaw gingerly as if it were numb.

"Who, lady?" demanded Swensen, eyeing Spinner.

"Captain Malcom. He knocked me down, then ran back to what he was doing. I pulled myself up and slipped out."

Spinner felt his temper boiling up. Then he caught sight of De Rosa's stricken expression.

"The rockets!" gasped the pilot. "Suppose he's taking one out!"

VII

THE three men were immediately galvanized into action. De Rosa tore the red door open and they piled through on his heels, leaving Anne leaning against the bulkhead as the door closed automatically behind them.

The chamber beyond it was a short wide compartment to which other entrances opened. There was a short balcony opposite them with a ladder at either end. Midway along the balcony was a small hatch in the outer bulkhead, matched by another down on their level. Spinner realized that the two port escape rockets were berthed snugly one above the other.

The lower hatch was shut as they entered, the other ajar. Swensen ran to the lower one, turned the enormous lever, tried to swing the airtight hatch open.

"No use," said De Rosa, looking closely. "It's spot-welded at the edges. He must be in the other one."

He started up the ladder with Swensen close behind. Spinner stared at the dark opening with vague apprehension.

There was no explosion, no flare of jets—just a ringing thud as the bulkheads shook with the recoil of the mechanical device that cast the escape craft free.

"*The door!*" De Rosa yelled down to Spinner.

His cry was almost deadened by the sudden moan of escaping air. Spinner turned back to the entrance, finding it suddenly difficult to move or breathe. With his hand on the handle he glanced up.

De Rosa was slowly collapsing, one hand still pushing against the open hatch. Beneath the added impact of Swensen's big body, the portal was swinging slowly shut.

Spinner yanked on the handle and slid the door back.

A colossal balloon burst in his face with a *whumph*. Face stinging he staggered back. Simultaneously he felt—

more than heard—the blow of the hatch crashing shut as the blast of new air caught the half-closed surface.

"Are you all right?"

He waved to Anne's scared face in the doorway. Swensen helped De Rosa down the ladder and they staggered into the corridor ahead of Spinner.

"Crazy fool!" gasped De Rosa, beginning to regain his breath.

"When they attempt self-destruction they are quite likely to include others in their plans," said Spinner.

"What?"

"I was just misquoting a sentence in a psych text. What would happen if, say, he turns back and aims himself at us?"

There was a moment of dead silence. Spinner realized that he was actually seeing human faces turning white before his eyes. For an instant he wondered about his own.

"The other rockets!" exclaimed De Rosa.

Without another word the others followed him in a mad dash across the ship to the opposite berths. They caught up to find him swinging open the hatch to the lower rocket.

"I was scared he'd welded this one too," he told them.

"What are you going to do?" demanded Spinner.

"Take another jet out and block him off if he tries it!

"You're crazy!" said Spinner but he wondered. It just might be possible.

"Not so crazy," retorted De Rosa. "I used to play a good game of air-polo. Besides, we could never duck with the *Scarlet Arrow*."

Spinner gripped his shoulder and drew him back from the entrance to the rocket.

"I'm crazier than you," he said. "Also, I'm ten years younger and I played with the Hornets two days before we left Mars."

De Rosa straightened up, staring. Realization swept across his face as Spinner heard Swensen and Anne ex-

claim behind him.

"Perkins—*Spinner* Perkins! I knew there was something about you." He whirled to Swensen. "He's right! I'll help him get launched. You get Miss Gibbs inside and ring in a general alarm!"

A FEW brief action-crammed minutes later Spinner found himself strapped before the simple controls of the escape rocket.

De Rosa had pointed out the release lever and promised to contact Spinner on the radio as soon as he could get forward. Now it was a matter of getting into action.

He took a deep breath and flipped the release. Within seconds sections of the outer skin slipped back. He could see the stars through the narrow observation band running back on both sides of his position. Strapped down as he was he hardly felt the shove when the rocket was flipped out of its berth.

Slowly he drifted away from the ship. He could see stars on all sides now except where the hull of the *Scarlet Arrow* cut off the view. He traveled along at the same speed as when the rocket had been a part of the parent vessel, in the direction of the small but piercingly bright Sun.

"Now where did he go?" Spinner muttered.

He scanned the instruments before him. The control panel and the pilot seat were mounted together and moved short distances in any direction to help absorb accelerations. At the moment the simplified detectors showed no matter within range except the bulk of the liner.

Spinner raised the nose with a blip of the small steering rockets rather than taking the time to spin the gyro. He fed a short blast into the drivers and pushed "above" the level of the *Scarlet Arrow*.

Lights flickered and shifted on his detector dials. As he slowly drifted ahead of the liner, having gained slightly in

his relative speed toward the Sun, the directional indicators picked up something new.

"Coming in from port," he muttered. "High—and probably at the rocket tubes."

He swung his craft about, using fuel prodigally to head tailward, and boosted himself over to the port side. Guessing by his indicators he blasted toward the invisible Malcom. When he was moving briskly in that direction he slowly flipped his craft nose for tail to point at the receding liner.

"If he didn't see those bursts, he's blind," he murmured.

The *Scarlet Arrow* shrank to almost nothing in the dimness ahead of him. It gave him a lonely feeling. The detectors indicated an object approaching from his right rear, so close that an alarm bell began to ring.

Spinner fed power to his main drive. The distant liner began to swell in his vision like a balloon. He used a touch of his steering rockets to head slightly past the tail.

Then he caught sight of Malcom's escape rocket from the extreme rear of his observation band. For a moment it was no more than a faint gleam in the void—but it closed the distance with a rush. Seeing the sleek exterior it was hard to imagine it guided by a distorted mind. Yet Malcom was obviously heading directly and aggressively at the big ship.

"Gonna make a big blaze for himself," Spinner muttered. "Well, I hope he sees *this* one!"

He let go an extravagant blast to force his craft over into the path of Malcom's and to kill somewhat his present velocity toward the liner. The chair-control assembly creaked and moved in its mountings.

The alarm bell gave way to a beeping whistle. The other rocket rushed upon him menacingly.

began to swing away. Just as Spinner was unconsciously shrinking into his padded seat and raising his hands before his face, in a slow futile gesture the tail of the other rocket was lit by heavy blasts.

Malcom, balked of his main target, shot off to the rear of the *Scarlet Arrow*.

The last Spinner could see visually, the captain was beginning to spin his craft as if preparing to decelerate.

"I'd better take a minute to see if De Rosa's available," he told himself.

He flipped the switch of his radio.

"Hello, De Rosa?" he called. "Can you hear me?"

"Like a rocket blast, I hear you," answered a voice he recognized as Reilly's. "Just talk natural."

"Spinner?" De Rosa broke in. "According to our instruments he went off to tailward but he's slowing down. Did you see him?"

"Did I see him?" Spinner snorted. "I fainted him half a mile off his curve!"

"Nice work!" said De Rosa hurriedly. "Now listen! We can get better readings here than you can with that little detector in your panel. He wants the ship—he won't like wasting himself on you. We'll try to estimate his next curve for you—okay?"

"Okay," agreed Spinner. "Handiest thing for me would be to know his range and what he's aiming at."

"All right—stand by!"

Spinner leaned forward to peer out the transparent band. He could see nothing but stars and the black shadow that was the *Scarlet Arrow*. He himself had by now drifted across her tail on a closer curve than that taken by Malcom.

"Perkins?" Reilly's voice spoke again, seemingly beside his ear.

"Here!"

"He damped that curve and now he's starting back. De Rosa's going to read me his approach."

"All set," promised Spinner.

He swung the rocket end for end again. Once more he was looking back

THEN the light of explosions flickered about its steering jets and the nose

on the liner, this time drifting away to starboard and behind. The big ship dwindled almost to a point before Reilly began to relay figures.

"He's two hundred miles . . . picking up speed . . . you getting this?"

"Getting it," Spinner confirmed.

"Hundred-seventy . . . can't tell the angle exactly yet . . . something like one-sixty lateral and two-ten vertical . . . hundred-fifty-five miles . . ."

"Hey, he's closing up fast!" said Spinner, worried.

"That he is . . . hundred-forty . . . hundred-thirty-five . . . De Rosa says you'd better get a little more distance in order to pick him up."

"Have I time?"

"If you're snappy about it," replied Reilly.

Spinner blasted around and kicked the rocket along in the general direction of Malcom's approach. He disliked thinking about how much fuel he was squandering. When he respun to head toward the ship the latter was detectable only by a wavering at the limits of his instruments.

"Can you still hear me, Reilly?" he called in sudden panic.

"Hear you fine," came the answer. "Don't worry, Doc. *You're* the one watching this from the reserved seat. Hang on!"

There was a brief pause, then Reilly resumed. "De Rosa says you'd better start picking up speed . . . that's it . . . correct about half a degree port . . . fine . . . *fine* . . . now you're bearing right on us. So is Malcom. You might be picking him up on your left tail any time now."

"Yeah," interrupted Spinner. "The needles are just beginning to jump a little. Still can't pin him down though."

"Feed them a little. He's got some speed on you. We've got you almost parallel to his curve now but he might pass you up."

Spinner grunted as his acceleration pushed him back in his chair despite the built-in "give."

"De Rosa says," Reilly reported, almost gaily, "that we have about one chance in ten of ducking. Don't think I haven't got my sweating little thumb on the master key of the whole tail battery!"

VIII

SPINNER tightened his lips at the thought of being in the other's position. Then his detector began to feed real information to his instruments.

"He's coming up on me," he reported.

"That's what Joe says. Light a fire there—if you can't match him at least let him see you!"

But Spinner had already driven himself deep into the cushions with steady acceleration. He watched his dials.

They really steered us into each other, he thought.

Malcom was creeping up on his beam, almost on a plane with Spinner's deck. Presently, by craning his neck, he actually caught sight of the other craft through the rear end of his observation band.

Malcom's rockets were working—small puffs that looked like steering blasts. Then these ceased and brighter flashes burst and disappeared, left miles astern in a pulse-beat.

"He's going to try to pass me!" Spinner gasped.

"It'll be close," answered Reilly, sounding tense. "You're practically together. We can't tell you anything more."

Spinner watched the other rocket gain slowly but steadily. When he flicked an eye to his instruments he saw that the *Scarlet Arrow* was detectable dead ahead though still invisible.

He looked back just as Malcom's rocket bursts thinned out and died completely.

Gave up, he thought.

There was no further sign of life from the other ship. Even its steering jets were dead although it began to look as if Malcom would collide with him.

Why isn't he trying to get round me? Spinner wondered. *Does he want to knock me out of the way first?*

He cut his tail tubes as another thought struck him.

"Reilly!" he exclaimed. "Ask De Rosa how much fuel that nut probably has left."

He heard a startled grunt. After a long pause, during which Malcom pulled up almost abeam and so close Spinner felt he could spit across the interval, De Rosa spoke over the radio.

"He could easily be dry by now, Spinner, considering the way he's been tossing it around. Is he still burning?"

"Not at all for the last couple of minutes."

"I think he's finished!" De Rosa's words came rapidly. "Do what you can but I don't think there's much chance of fainting him off this time. We'll scan for you later if we can juggle this can fast enough."

There was a tone of finality in the last words that told Spinner De Rosa was already beginning to move. Sure enough, far ahead in the star-studded void, a flame flickered and swelled. Reilly had his thumb down.

"We're too close!" whispered Spinner. "If we were abeam, yes. But we're coming up on her from behind."

He studied Malcom's rocket, hanging in the blackness to his left and touched his steering buttons. When he was swung far enough to point across Malcom's nose he jabbed briefly at the firing buttons of his drive tubes.

Immediately he began to swing around again, so that he approached the other craft with the nose of his own rocket circling away and his jets swinging in to aim at it.

It works in air-polo, he thought. *Why not here?*

The beeps in his instrument board desisted from sheer frustration. Spinner tensed himself in his seat, wondering if he could possibly have been accurate enough to do by eye what he had attempted, even when the two craft

had been so closely adjusted in speed along the same curve.

The control-seat assembly jounced straight backward, creaking with the shock of the mild collision.

Spinner lit a torch with his main drive.

His hands hammered down on the keys and held them depressed while flames shot back with a driving fury that blasted him into the depths of the blackness around him.

IN ONE short instant before his hands slipped from the keys something snapped under the control panel and several of the wildly dancing needles went dead. A temperature indicator for the tail section reared up past the red danger line.

Then the blackness closed in. First the observation band disappeared from Spinner's vision. Then he was left with a narrowing circle of instruments. The last thing he saw before blacking out was the central detector dial . . .

Spinner felt as if his head were lying over on his left shoulder. He wondered whether he should try to check this assumption by moving. Perhaps it would be easier to open his eyes and look. That brought up the problem of whether his eyes might not already be open but staring into darkness.

He stirred and forced himself to raise his lids. The first thing he saw was that same detector dial. His head *had* been lying on his left shoulder. He stretched his neck gingerly.

How long?

The thought straightened him up.

He ran a quick glance over his instruments. They failed to indicate any matter within their range. He looked out the observation band. As far as the appearance of the stars went he might have been in the same spot he had started from. The distant Sun still glowed beyond the bright star that was Earth.

Of the *Scarlet Arrow* there was no sign. . .

"Let's not get excited, now," he adjured himself. "First thing is to cut the speed as much as I can."

Watching his instruments closely, he spun the rocket a precise hundred and eighty degrees. Then he began to blast with his drive rockets, to brake as much as he could before his fuel ran out.

When the rockets went dead at last he sat and stared at his instrument panel. His reluctance to stare out the observation band at the dark void was such that he did not admit it even to himself. He kept his eyes on the discreetly glowing lights of the panel.

"Why didn't I just stay in that bar by the canal?" he asked himself between set teeth. "At least it was warm and full of air!"

He knew that sooner or later he ought to leave his seat and check the resources of the rocket. But for the moment he could not bring himself to do it.

"Are you getting neurotic—*Doctor?*?" he asked aloud.

A few minutes later he thought he heard faint voices over the radio.

"*Reilly!*" he called. "*De Rosa!* Are you there?"

Too far for this transmitter, he thought.

It must have been an hour later that he heard the clicking from the control panel. He examined the dials.

The range indicator was broken but the general detector reported a considerable mass in the vicinity. "There they are!" he exclaimed hopefully.

Almost immediately, Reilly's voice answered. "That you, Perkins? Hey, De Rosa! Can you hear him?"

"Hello, Spinner! Listen—we've all but got hold of you. We have two rockets out to tow you in. You okay?"

Spinner let out his breath slowly. "Just fine!" he murmured. "What happened?"

"I don't know what you did but you left him spinning in space like a god-damn' pinwheel. He was still blacked out when we fished him in and his drive tubes were mostly fused."

"He missed?"

"Neatest thing I ever saw on a detector grid!" chortled De Rosa. "One of you went to each side of us. We lost track of you for a minute but he was easy to pick up. Jones tells us he was hardly able to talk by the time they wrapped him up and locked him in his own cabin."

HALF an hour later De Rosa and the third pilot handling the remaining escape rocket had maneuvered Spinner alongside his original berth. Space-suited figures hauled him in with magnetic grapples, then disappeared ahead as the hull sections slid smoothly together.

It took them a few minutes to let air into the compartment and get him through to the inner corridor.

"You all okay?" grinned the burly Swensen through the opened face-plate of his space helmet.

"Why not?" answered Spinner, bringing an even wider grin to the giant's face.

"Hey, *Jones!*" cried the latter. "You get him up forward. I gotta help berth the others now."

The steward, his features cracked in a jubilant smile, made way for Spinner along the corridor and through babbling groups of passengers in the lounge.

"We must have a little professional discussion later, Doctor!" called one male voice.

Spinner looked around and saw Dr. Lebrun beaming at him. "Okay," he agreed amiably. "Just call me James, Doc!"

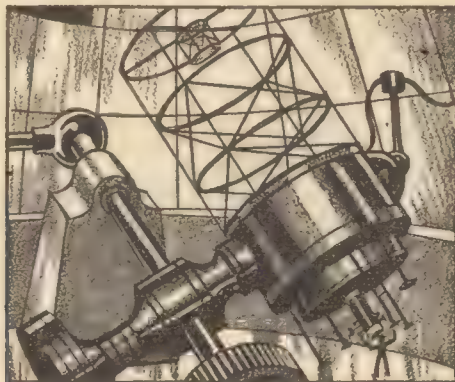
"I'm just *dying* to hear about it!" he heard Mrs. Crandall shrieking.

He saw Anne Gibbs standing with her father at the opposite entrance to the lounge. Before he could reach them, however, he passed Dawn Blushe. The blonde was clinging possessively to the arm of a grinning d'Abagnanti.

"Like to offer you a cigar, Perkins," said the latter warmly. "For that out

(Concluded on page 145)

Beginning a new series of articles about the latest findings on the Solar System, with Mercury coming first in the Planet parade!



Our Inhabited Universe

By JAMES BLISH

I—THE MOON OF THE SUN

WE'LL start with a prediction! Practically everyone now living probably will still be living when man lands on the Moon. There are strong indications that the first actual space-flight will be made within the next five years—perhaps sooner. While we have no official news on the progress of the artificial satellite project announced by our government a few years ago it is probably approaching completion now.

We already know a good deal about our neighbors, the planets—enough to predict in some cases quite specifically what kinds of conditions their first explorers will meet. And we will soon know some answers to a question which our telescopes cannot answer.

How many other planets support life? In this series of articles we'll attempt

to predict what kinds of critters, if any, the first interplanetary explorers will find. We'll try to strike a balance between the strictest kind of scientific speculation and pure fantasy. From the strictly observational point of view we can allow only one other planet, Mars, to support life at all. From the point of view of pure fantasy anything *could* exist on any planet—but we'll try to avoid the utterly improbable.

It is out of the question, however, that any other planet in our solar system with the possible exception of Mars could harbor any form of life *with which we're familiar*. Almost all the local planets are so inhospitable to us that man could not survive there for an instant without elaborate precautions—nor could a dog, a crawfish or even a bacterium. At our present level of

knowledge man could no more walk the surfaces of the giant outer planets than he could walk the surface of the Sun.

But what about unfamiliar but possible forms of life? Science-fiction stories frequently have suggested that a life-substance based upon the element silicon, instead of on carbon as is all Earthly life, might develop under conditions prohibitive to carbon-based life.

That possibility certainly exists. Actually, it does not take us too far away from "life as we know it." Silicon behaves like carbon in a number of ways and it seems likely that the extremes of temperature, pressure and other factors which a silicon-based creature could stand would *not* be enormously greater than those tolerable to Earthly life.

Which brings us to the possible existence of other *Earth-like* planets. Here, strangely enough, we are on firmer ground. The existence of Earth-like planets outside our own Solar System is perfectly possible, indeed some astronomers think it probable. It is even possible that there are large numbers of them. The evidence for this is now so good that we'll discuss it at length in a later article.

But now let's take a trip through our own Solar System. We shall see some mightily savage planets, some of which we shall be able to "explore" only at a great distance. In every case we shall see natural beauty wilder and more "unearthly" than the visions of most science-fiction writers. And in some places we may find life.

Good Illustrations

The small planet Mercury, closest of the known nine to the Sun, provides some good illustrations for the points noted above. It is safe to say that Mercury will not be the first planet visited by man and probably not the second either. Venus and Mars will have priority as will our own Moon, of course.

The trip will be 'downhill' all the way, directly or almost directly into the flam-

ing eye of the Sun. Most of the work the engines will do, after the take-off, will be done in battling the Sun's tremendous gravitational pull. Even a brave man would think twice before undertaking a trip of that sort.

Our rocketeers, of course, would not compute a course for their ship which would put Mercury on a direct line between the ship and the Sun all the way. Under such conditions, it would be impossible to see Mercury at all until too late.

But Mercury averages less than 38 million miles from the Sun and for most of the trip, even if it were begun on Venus, Mercury's nearest neighbor, it would seem to the ship's passengers that they were headed for quick cremation. The problem would be complicated by Mercury's odd path around the Sun, which takes the planet, during part of its year, much closer to the Sun than its mean distance would suggest.

Once the ship is closing in for landing, however, the picture would be a little more encouraging. Mercury by then would be near enough to present a respectable size—it is 3,100 miles through, about 40 percent of the size of the Earth or not quite twice as big as our Moon. Also the ship by now would have its back to the Sun—that is, it would be landing in daylight.

Why would the ship attempt to land in such fiercely hot daylight? There are a number of reasons, most of them too complex to discuss here, but two of them are obvious. Landing in strange territory in the middle of the night is hazardous even with the best of navigating instruments.

Secondly, Mercury always presents approximately the same face to the Sun—both its day and its year are the same length, about 88 of our days—and so the Sunward side of Mercury is the only one which we have been able to observe. Even now we have rough maps of that hemisphere, showing belts of mountainous territory and, more importantly, areas where the terrain is fairly flat and

so may be suitable for making a landing.

But it would be hot. The temperature on the sunward side of Mercury averages 400° Centigrade—(770° on our workaday Fahrenheit thermometer)—which is quite hot enough to melt lead. Water boils at 100° C. Since the planet “wabbles” a little as it travels, only about a third of the planet never sees any light at all. In the twilight zone, where the Sun comes up above the horizon for a while and then backs down the way it came, the temperature seldom approaches the average. This zone when in darkness must become very cold.

There is another source of variation in the temperature and that is the “eccentricity” of Mercury’s orbit. When it is farthest from the Sun Mercury’s distance from the parent body is 43,500,000 miles. But at the opposite end of its orbit it is only 28,500,000 miles away.

As it approaches the Sun that body would appear to swell alarmingly in the sky—starting from a size already three times the size of the Sun as we see it from Earth—and the temperature would shoot up to match. At noon on Mercury, at the moment of closest approach to the Sun, the temperature would melt zinc and tin, as well as lead.

Even under the best possible conditions the Sunward surface of Mercury would be far too hot to tolerate the best-insulated human beings for very long. Could it tolerate any other form of life?

Alien Life

There is a bare possibility that it could. Even on Earth we have some simple forms of life, the sulphur-fixing bacteria, which can and do live in boiling hot springs, deriving their energy from simple chemical reactions which the heat of their environment makes possible.

At a peak temperature four times the boiling point of water no form of protoplasmic life could survive, especially without water and oxygen—neither of which exist on Mercury. But by the same token chemical reactions at such

temperatures occur much more rapidly than they do at Earth-normal temperatures and it does seem possible that a complex of such reactions might add up, over the course of millions of years, into a life-form.

But it would have to be a rather dull and simple sort of life form like a bacterium. The chances of finding intelligent life native to Mercury are nil. We may find life of a sort on the crater-pocked mountainous Sunward side—but life of an order of “intelligence” which would make an Earthly mosquito Einsteinian by comparison.

Even our chances of discovering it would be small, for we would have to use the microscope to find it—a microscope heated to the temperature “normal” of Mercury so as not to freeze it to death. And examining microscope slides of molten sludge under the blast of Mercury’s Sun, while one’s asbestos suit heats up steadily and occasional clouds of dust—for Mercury may have several active volcanoes—swirl about one, would be difficult to say the least.

But wait a minute—we’re forgetting that there are literally two sides to this question. We’ve been talking about the two-thirds of Mercury where the Sun shines either always or now and then. But what about the third that is always dark?

This part of Mercury is lit by nothing but the stars. Throughout that area it is not hot but bitterly cold. In this region the landscape would tend to be even more craggy and chaotic than that of the Sunward side. For here, in addition to mountain ranges and meteor craters we shall probably find great glaciers and bergs—rivers, spires and fields of—

Ice?

No, unfortunately. There is no water on Mercury. These “ice” fields are frozen gases—heavy gases like carbon dioxide, frozen solid—the remnants of Mercury’s thin atmosphere, driven over into these cold wastes by the intense heat of the day side. There is also the chance that Mercury is not quite large enough

to produce such extreme cold on much of its night side, so that we may find also a "sea" of liquefied gases.

The point of greatest cold on the planet shifts constantly, like the "noon" point, because of the planet's wobbling. And, of course, that point is considerably warmer when the planet is closest to the Sun. The result, if the general temperature of the night area makes the "sea" of liquid gases possible, would be spectacular.

Gales of Gas

Standing on one shore of this incredibly frigid sea our explorers would watch it being torn by gales, blowing from the opposite shore where the temperature has risen enough to gasify some of the liquid of the sea. These gases would blow toward the center of the sea, where the cold is greatest, descending in "rain" as they went. At the center of the cold there might be a mountain of solidified gases being eroded by the warm side of the sea and building on the other side as the point of greatest cold shifts.

Then, weeks later, as the planet begins to wobble in the opposite direction, the near side of the sea would begin to boil at our explorers' feet. Outside the lake, all around it right to the innermost boundaries of the twilight zone, the few gases which do not liquefy even at the coldest temperatures possible to Mercury would cause a constant thin whistling as they whirled to and fro in response to the changes of temperature. And occasionally the enormous clouds possibly of volcanic dust, which have been observed, would obscure the stars.

We do not yet know whether or not Mercury is quite large enough to make the phenomenon described above possible. It is also possible that the dark side of the planet is essentially as uneventful as the Sunward side, differing only in that it has a thin—a very thin—atmosphere of heavy inactive gases and is too cold to support any chemical reaction, let alone any which might make life possible.

Will we stay on Mercury, then, once we have reached it? It is certainly a wonderful base from which to study the Sun as well as certain gravitational problems arising from our present relativity theories. Living conditions for us in the twilight zone would be no more inhospitable than those we will already have met and conquered on our own Moon.

Whether or not the enormous expense of maintaining a Mercurian base could be justified for research purposes alone, however, is doubtful. The discovery of large amounts of uranium or other fissionable radioactives on Mercury—the possibility is good, by the way—might supply another motive, a military or a profit motive, for the maintenance of such a base.

Men tend to find reasons, even where none exist, for staying in environments which they have conquered. Mercury is a small world and a desolate and harsh one. But in many respects it is totally unlike any other world in our Solar System and there is good reason to believe that for sheer magnificence its scenery will be hard to beat. Perhaps this will be motive enough. This writer, at least, hopes to see Mercury before calling his experience complete.

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I PSI

A Novelet by

CARTER SPRAGUE

EVER since Professor Rhine of Duke University began his marathon card-experiment in E.S.P. some twenty-five-plus years ago people have been aware of the possibilities of the supra-normal in otherwise average humans. However, like Mark Twain's comment about the weather—"Everybody talks about it but nobody does anything about it." Mr. Sprague is the second author to prove this statement false in TWS. The first, of course, was James Blish, whose *LET THE FINDER BEWARE* wound up 1949 in a blaze of extra-sensory glory. Those who remember Mr. Blish's fine novel for its eerie qualities of high drama and suspense, had best beware before tackling Mr. Sprague's novelet.

The approach is utterly different. The one

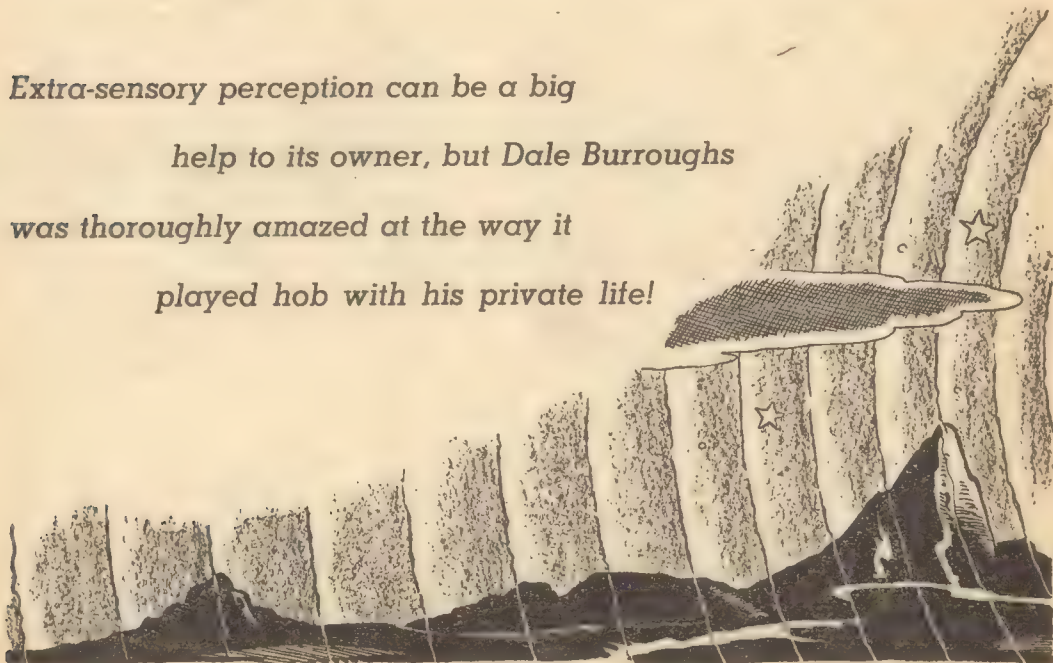
was drama—the other high comedy with overtones verging on lunacy. However, you'll have to catalogue these and other variations between them for yourselves. And, incidentally, prepare for more stories based on this fascinating subject to come in the very near future.

—THE EDITOR.

I

THE helicopter settled gently to earth on a small level clearing, high on the side of one of the dark-forested hills. The pilot switched off the engines and at once they were surrounded by the

Extra-sensory perception can be a big
help to its owner, but Dale Burroughs
was thoroughly amazed at the way it
played hob with his private life!



I PSI

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was drama—the other high comedy with overtones verging on lunacy. However, you'll have to catalogue these and other variations between them for yourselves. And, incidentally, prepare for more stories based on this fascinating subject to come in the very near future.

—THE EDITOR.

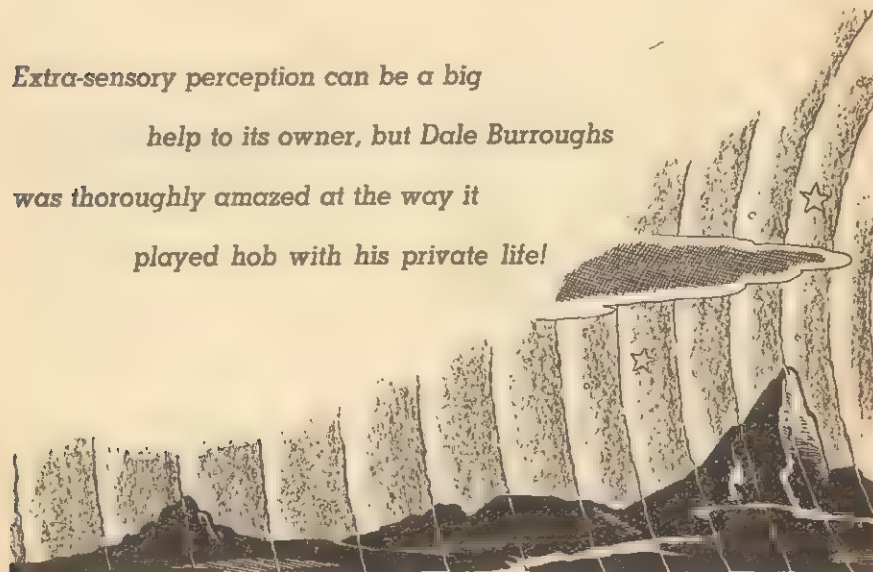
THE helicopter settled gently to earth on a small level clearing, high on the side of one of the dark-forested hills. The pilot switched off the engines and at once they were surrounded by the

Extra-sensory perception can be a big

help to its owner, but Dale Burroughs

was thoroughly amazed at the way it

played hob with his private life!



murky silence of the windless moonless night.

"Okay," he said to his two passengers, "this is it."

Dale Burroughs, looking long and lanky even in his bulky Air Force coveralls, uncoiled himself from a bucket seat, opened the cabin door and poked his head outside. "Baby!" he exclaimed as the chill air stung his nostrils. "It's cold outside!"

"No song cues—please," said Jeanne, stirring from her own seat. "We've got work to do."

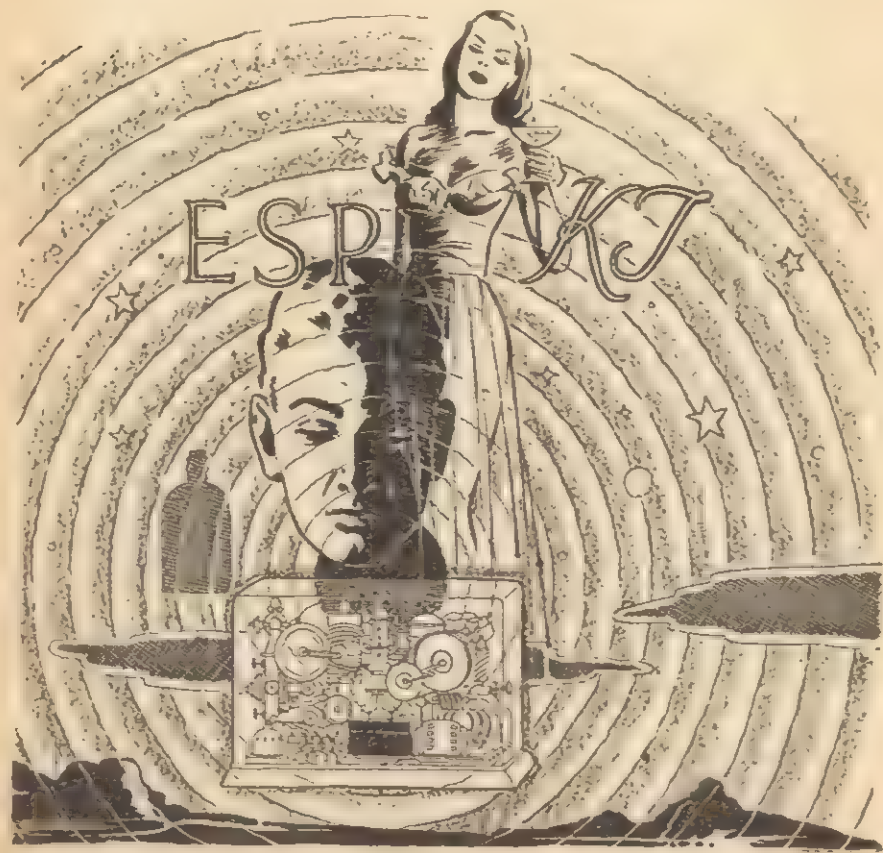
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roughs. He sighed, then said to the pilot, "Think we cleared the radar network all right?"

"Maybe," said the pilot. "We've got a couple of drones messing around to keep the boys busy. But the sooner we pull out of here the better I'll like it. We're in a hot district."

"You can say that again," Burroughs told him.

"Let's not sit around talking about it," said Jeanne. She was the first to step outside. Even in the blanket of darkness that surrounded them—even in the coverall that clouded the curves of her figure, Burroughs could not escape



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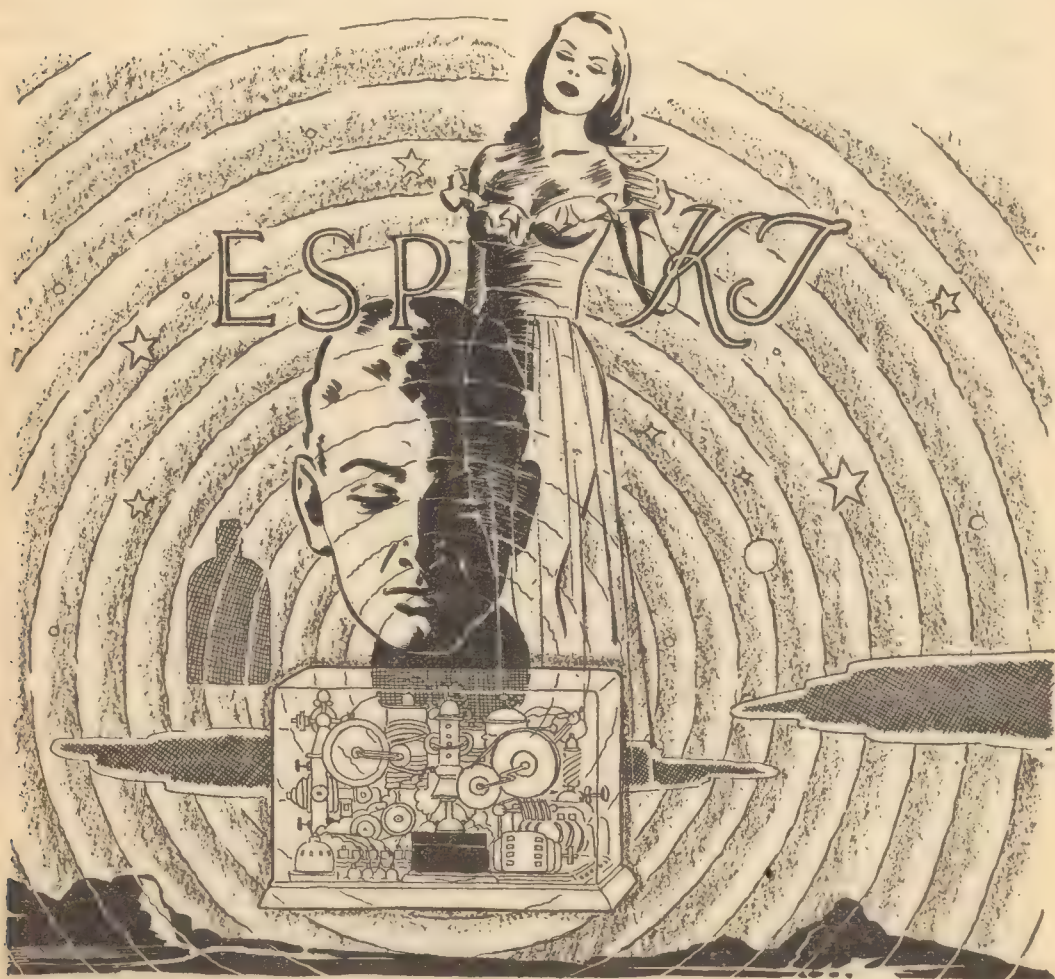
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the essential femaleness of her. He had to remind himself sharply that this was no time for . . .

Surviving a number of barked shins and knuckles, Burroughs and the pilot got the bulky box of the machine out onto the rock-strewn gravel that surrounded the copter. It looked more like an outside typewriter case than what it was.

WHILE Jeanne looked on, the two of them dug a small pit in the half-frozen ground, placed the machine in it. The pilot looked at Burroughs, said, "Cover it up now?"

"Not yet," said Jeanne. She knelt, fumbled with the one small switch on the side of the box, turned it on, stood up, dusting off her hands sharply.

"Now," she said.

They covered it, smoothing out the dirt carefully to leave a minimum of traces. Finally Burroughs and Jeanne stood looking down at where it was buried while the pilot took the shovels back to the copter. Burroughs could feel her tremble slightly in the curve of his arm, knew that he himself was none too steady.

"Do you think it will work here, darling?" Jeanne asked him.

"Keep them crossed," he told her. Then, "Lord, the liquor!"

He went back to the copter, dug the bottle out of the bag under his bucket seat. The pilot, watching him with grave disbelief, said, "I've done some weird jobs in my day but this is the screwiest yet. Getting drunk at a time like this."

"You don't know the half of it, fellow," Burroughs told him. He got the bottle of whiskey uncapped and carried it back to where Jeanne was sitting on the ground. "Should have brought blankets," he said. "This is going to be cold if it's not quick."

She laughed, said, "We've got our anti-freeze," nodding at the bottle. "It certainly is different from the first time . . ."

There was a bottle involved the first

time too—but with a difference. It was not isolated with its consumers in the chill bleakness of night in the mountains of Central Asia. Instead, one of many, it stood upon a gleaming chromium cellarette amid the lush and plush surroundings of a penthouse suite atop the Midland Park Hotel in Midland City. Its potential consumers were many and its strength was cut by ice cubes in a thermobowl and various sorts of fizz water.

It provided part of the background for Eli Fennister's most prodigious pitch. Fennister himself partook of it sparingly as a step of the carefully-staged build-up, for like all other gentlemen of the profession he had learned early that there was only one place for liquor—in a sucker's stomach.

He glanced down at his own embonpoint, held rigorously in check by a maroon silk cummerbund. Covertly he regarded his reflection in the pier-glass mirror that lined a half-open door to one of the bedrooms of the suite. His dinner clothes fitted his six-foot frame magnificently and the black pearl of his single stud winked reassurance at him from the glass. His jowls wore the healthy pink of a masseur, his blue eyes were clear, his greying hair lay in faultless order atop the thin spot on his pate.

Dale Burroughs, accepting a highball glass from the cellarette attendant, wondered how the old goat managed it. In the same spot, he knew, he would be ashen-faced and trembling, doing a limp dance in time to the beat of his knocking knees. Yet Old Eli, on the verge of promoting a colossal fraud, seemed as jovial, as poised, as complacent, as if he were merely about to trim a carefully-selected prospect in a two-bit poker game.

Here were no two-bit prospects. There were three of them present and all-told they could probably muster more than a billion dollars amongst themselves in cash and liquid assets. Their non-liquid assets—in goods, in controlling directorships, in less easily-traced powers—

ran well beyond auditing possibilities.

Seated in one corner with his ever-present male secretary beside him was old MacIlvaine, the utilities mogul, his long Gaelic countenance reflecting his constant inner concern over the welfare of the lining of his stomach. Sipping a highball under the reproving eye of the plump grey marmoset that was his wife stood de la Torre, saturnine satrap of the motor industry, whose face carefully reflected nothing at all.

Burroughs risked a look at Marcus Colden, chunky dynamic communications counsel and, he devoutly hoped, his father-in-law to be. Colden was regarding him with a one-ton look of speculation as Burroughs lifted his glass. Annoyed at this overt dissection the younger man drained it in one gulp, proffered it for a refill.

IT WOULD, he thought, serve the old so-and-so right if he let Eli Fennister remove a hunk of his financial hide. Burroughs, whose life during most of his thirty-three years had been spent performing the non-essential consummately well, disliked acutely being labeled what he was—especially by Jeanne's father.

"Take it easy," she whispered, brushing lightly against him as she crossed the deep-piled carpet to talk to Mrs. de la Torre.

"Quiet, dog-face!" he replied, his voice low but intense. She grinned flickeringly, managed quickly to reassume the mask of frozen amiability that was as much a part of her uniform on such occasions as the unbrash allure of her evening gown.

Eli Fennister took over then. He shot a quick warning glance at Burroughs, who nodded minuscular reassurance, then cleared his throat and moved to the center of the room. His voice was as effective, as beautifully controlled as Tommy Dorsey's trombone, when he spoke after achieving the silence and attention he desired.

"I am not going to say much in

words," he told them. "I am going to let the device I am about to show you talk in action. Device, by the way, is hardly the word for it. In its own way it is perhaps as much a human miracle as the electric light or the development of atomic fission.

"Suffice it to say"—he paused and let his magnetic gaze rove the small assemblage—"that it requires virtually no power to attain its initial start. Once in operation it draws power for its continued operation—not from batteries, not from water under the influence of gravity, not even from the sun. If it did the present demonstration would be futile."

There was another pause, a restless stirring among his listeners. When it had ended Eli Fennister went on. "This generator," he told them almost casually, "derives its energy from the air itself. It offers the cheapest source of power mankind has ever known. For it will continue to operate indefinitely."

There was a mutter of protest but Fennister merely smiled and clapped his hands. A couple of uniformed hotel servants came in then through the half-open bedroom door, carrying a boxlike device on a table between them. Fennister showed them where to put it, well out in the room, and Burroughs suppressed a smile.

"The gimmick," he told himself when Fennister made a minor adjustment, as if to make certain that the table legs were steady.

"What's funny?" Jeanne whispered in his ear. He motioned her to silence and finished his drink. There had been cocktails before dinner, wine with the meal, liqueurs afterwards and now the highballs. He was feeling very mellow indeed at the prospect of watching a trio of hard-headed business magnates like MacIlvaine, de la Torre and—yes—Marcus Colden bamboozled by a man he and he alone in all that room knew to be an out-and-out fraud.

Burroughs studied the table. It was no more than a strong bridge table with

metal legs and metal rim around its deal top. He studied the rug beneath it, could see nothing wrong. But, knowing Eli Fennister, he knew the gimmick was there.

Fennister opened the box, revealing an inner case of transparent plastic within which was a welter of complex machinery and wiring that meant nothing to Burroughs and a small inner black box at the center of the contraption.

"This is the one element of the dynamo I cannot permit you to see," said Fennister after explaining the various other parts of his machine. "Here is a small battery-generator which will serve as our starter. With your permission I shall get it going."

He did so and things began to happen beneath the plastic cover. Wheels moved with increasing rapidity and a faint humming sound could be heard. Burroughs, fascinated against his will, felt other awarenesses drifting from him as on a tide.

He felt a familiar excitement, a hyper-awareness, spread within him. It swept over him before he could check it, swept over him with greater force than ever in the past. All at once he *knew* what lay within the little black box in the core of the machine.

DALE BURROUGHS was the possessor of a well-developed E. S. P. quality. Furthermore he knew it—and had vowed to forego its use upon discovering how he had been employing it during most of his life. If he hadn't taken this oath he would have been an even bigger fraud than Eli Fennister himself.

It had begun to make itself felt in late childhood. Occasionally—like a quick glimpse of the moon through a cloud-covered night sky—he could now and then see the headlines his father was reading in his newspaper from across the breakfast table. Once he found a ring for his now-married sister although neither of them remembered where she had lost it. There had been several dozen

similar instances.

In prep school it had proved tremendously useful. He had been rated something of a wizard for his ability to get high marks while doing little daily work. By concentrating he had discovered himself able to read examination questions before the papers that contained them left the printer's a half mile from the campus.

Fatigue, he found, was a quickening factor. His extra sense worked better when he was close to exhaustion. When he was older he discovered that liquor also had a loosening effect—at a certain stage of intoxication.

Burroughs had kept his gift to himself. He became a little frightened by it as he grew old enough to attain awareness of its possibilities. Abnormality—even super-normality—had not appealed to him. None the less, in secret, he had employed his talent.

Left-handed, Burroughs had become a ranking tennis player, just below Davis Cup standards. When his father died, leaving little money, he had drifted into the pleasant life of a tennis bum. Always a good card player, he had found his gift immensely profitable, especially in big-money poker games.

Usually, late in the evening when the stakes were running high, he could count on a brief period of ability to read the back of every card on the table. It was then when, apparently half under the weather, he made his major coups.

Since he was shrewd enough to play rather better than even while not in the grip of his special gift he had, in the course of a half dozen years, managed to lift himself out of the bum class for keeps. His luck had been long a subject for headshakes and moans among those with whom he played.

There had been no question of cheating—until, about a year earlier, Burroughs stumbled on one of the volumes dealing with Extra Sensory Perception put out by Professor Leonidas Meuse of Earl University, who had been conducting experiments in such matters under

an endowment for the better part of a generation.

Horried, he had faced for the first time what he had done. In effect it was no better than cheating. Of course there was no way in which he could return his winnings—they were now invested and paying him a respectable five-figure income each year. Not unless he wanted to be marked for a crook by the few, a lunatic by the many.

By that time he had met Jeanne Colden and his chief anxiety was to impress her father with the fact that he would not, as a son-in-law, put an indelible blot of shiftlessness on the spotless Colden escutcheon.

He had met and made time with a number of girls as comely as Jeanne, in some cases more beautiful, during his years on the tennis circuit. Burroughs was good looking in his tall dark-blond way and his court career proved not only glamorous but a magnificent agent for keeping his long lean body trim and hard.

There had, perhaps, been a few girls more intelligent or better bred. And one or two had been definitely stronger in that rarest of all traits in the female—wit. But Jeanne was, in some respects, the perfect all-arounder—good looking, healthy, smart and reasonably assured under all conceivable conditions.

However, none of these duly inventoried assets was the reason for his fall—nor was it the fact that she had fallen for him as hard as he for her. There was an invisible thread that linked them, an innate understanding which made it possible, in a matter of three or four dates, for them to talk in outwardly disconnected phrases since they could follow one another's thought trains. Such "conversation" drove Jeanne's father all but out of his mind.

Burroughs smiled faintly at this thought, which peeped into his abstraction only to withdraw quickly as he lost himself in the pattern of Eli Fennister's machine. Yes, he knew what was in the little black box that was its heart, knew

and wondered how in hades Old Eli was going to make it produce anything.

For the little black box contained nothing at all.

II

ELI FENNISTER was continuing his talk but the words came through to Burroughs like the faint hum of insects beyond a porch screen on a lazy summer afternoon. Although he could never have put it in formula he understood the machine—and yet he did not understand it. It was potentially something more than the mere intended fraud-basis for Old Eli's biggest pitch.

There was an alignment of circuits—he could sense that they had been so arranged merely to mystify trained observers—that was part of some larger pattern. He was utterly unable to understand the why and where of it—but it was there.

Something was wrong. Through his absorption Burroughs felt the undercurrent of strain in Eli Fennister's mellifluous tones. The little motor was humming but it was not performing as it should. He felt himself on the verge of returning to a more conscious level.

Then, abruptly, he was plunged back into the depths of the near-subconscious. Alarmingly, the impulse did not come from within himself. He felt picked up, dragged along, fused with some other personality. Part of him fought against it like a swimmer caught in deepwater rapids and unable to regain the surface.

For a flashing instant the meaning of Old Eli's machine was as translucently clear as the plastic envelope that covered it—and then the vision was gone and he was once more in control of his consciousness, eyeing his empty glass with hungry disappointment.

The machine was roaring now—its various members moving with blurring rapidity, its increased hum pervading the entire room. Old Eli, his voice raised a notch, was proceeding triumphantly with the rest of his demonstration.

"I have here," he told them, "a number of standard gauges for the measurement of electronic power. You will notice that not even the battery-starter is now connected. I invite you to check the amount of power which the dynaeramo is now generating."

While the financiers clustered around the machine Burroughs sneaked back to the cellarette. After what had happened he needed a drink. Before he could put glass to lips it was removed from his hand by a set of firm well-groomed feminine fingers.

"If you're going to be a tank, count me in," Jeanne told him. She raised the tumbler, took a healthy swig of its contents. Burroughs, still feeling drained, gestured for another.

"What do you think of it, Dale?" Jeanne asked him, nodding in the general direction of Eli Fennister's machine.

"Stick around when the others go," he told her softly. "I know Old Eli. He used to be in the fake country-club promotion racket when he could round up enough loaded suckers. Something's screwed."

"It's very—impressive," the girl told him. For a moment she seemed to shiver. Burroughs drew her close to his side, finding in her nearness a reassurance he himself needed.

"You know some awfully strange people," she told him.

"I get around, honey. Wonder if Old Eli plans to make them back it or pay through the nose to suppress it," he said idly.

"Probably ready to jump either way," she replied.

He thought it over, decided she was right and would know he thought so, considered Old Eli, who was in the process of putting the black case over the plastic lid of his machine. It seemed to be still going, without regard to its type of cover.

"Like salt in the sea," he told Jeanne with apparent irrelevance. But she nodded, having followed his thought

processes in and out of the old fairy story about the salt mill that refused to cease grinding and was finally dumped into the ocean.

"Sort of," she replied. She watched Old Eli draw himself up to full height as he ushered his guests toward the suite door. With a faint smile on her well-tanned features she said, "Two-way stretch."

Burroughs knew she was speaking of Fennister's cummerbund. "Right," he replied. "Old Eli used to wear a girdle."

Marcus Colden paused in the doorway and looked at his daughter. "Are you and your—er—young man coming with us?" he asked.

"We're staying around, Daddy," Jeanne replied. "We'll join you at the house later."

"Not too much later," the older man grumbled. He said good night to his host, who closed the door after him and came back to Burroughs and Jeanne, mopping his brow with a silk handkerchief.

"Nice pitch," Burroughs told him. "Think you've got them on the hook, Eli? That's quite a box you've got there."

Fennister looked from Burroughs to Jeanne, then back again, in alarm. "See here, Dale," he began, "I didn't mind your coming . . ."

"Relax, Eli," Burroughs told him. "If Jeanne hasn't inherited the family bent for larceny she's at least sympathetic toward it. After all, look at what it's given her."

"I'll hammer-slay you," announced Jeanne bellicosely. "I'll carve you up and send you home in a half dozen packages. I'll turn you over to City Hospital for dissection and sit in on it."

"Good God!" exclaimed Fennister. "Is she always like this?"

"I hope so—I like it," Burroughs told him. "Who rigged this gizmo of yours anyway, Eli? Don't tell me *you* did it."

"Hardly," said Fennister, apparently resigned to the fact he was going to have to talk openly in front of a

"client's" daughter. "I hooked up with Mike Sweeney on this one. He's a genius."

Burroughs, who had heard of the legendary Sweeney, agreed. A born carnival gadgeteer, Sweeney had developed more mechanical and electrical methods for separating a sucker and his money than anyone since the S. E. C. clamped down on the stock market.

"Where's Mike operating?" Burroughs asked. "Downstairs?"

"Come on if you must," said Eli Fennister. "He's got to turn this damned thing off before we run a million-buck electric bill in this flea-trap. Sometimes Mike's ideas are a little *too* big."

"Why not use that?" said Jeanne, pointing toward the telephone. Both men regarded her with something akin to pity.

"Never heard of each other," Burroughs said hurriedly. Jeanne nodded and her well-assembled features turned pink.

"Oh," she said, "of course. Pardon me, loved ones, if I seem just a mite on the sub-cretinic side. In spite of Dale's allegations about my father I am not entirely au fait on the etiquette of the confidence profession. I presume you want no record of having communication with your—er—colleague."

"I could hardly have put it more succinctly myself," said Old Eli with grandiloquent courtesy. He led them toward the door.

"He's cute!" Jeanne whispered as they reached the corridor.

"Like a king cobra," Burroughs replied sotto voce. Arm in arm they followed the promoter down a two-flight stairway to the floor beneath. Old Eli poked his head through the stair door to make sure the corridor was clear, then led them rapidly to the room beneath the one in which the demonstration had so recently been held.

"Should we be here?" the girl asked him while Fennister lifted his right hand and rapped twice, then three times on the door.

"No but we are," Burroughs told her. "Eli can't keep us out. I caught him out properly once in a poker game at one of his phony country clubs. He was lucky to get out with his skin."

HE HAD no desire to tell her the true story. Actually he had been able to read the switch in cards Eli had pulled during the biggest hand of the evening. Consequently he himself had been able to outbluff the promoter by drawing successfully to an inside straight flush—he had known the proper card was coming up on the draw—had been able to annihilate him and had told him afterward what he thought of him—in private. Fennister simply considered Burroughs a smarter operator than himself, as such respected him.

Fennister knocked again, frowning, when there was no answer to his rap. He said from the side of his mouth, "If I didn't know Mike was a teeto I'd think he got tanked on the job. We've got to get that damned gizmo of his turned off upstairs."

After a third code rap sounds of life could be heard behind the blank face of the door. They were slow and erratic and Old Eli's frown deepened. Finally there was the scrape of a turning bolt and the door was opened. Fennister, in no mood to be denied, pushed on into the room, almost knocking over a long string-bean of a man with a face like a pickled walnut.

The promoter marched across the carpet to a compact powerful-looking electric generator that sat on the floor beside the sofa lining one side wall. He looked at it, then said in declamatory tones. "Thank the Lord you had sense enough in that scrambled noggin of yours, Sweeney, to shut the damned thing off. I told you to give it exactly ten minutes—no more. This thing eats up electricity the way cannibals eat up missionaries."

"So help me, boss," said the unfortunate Sweeney, who stood just inside the now-closed door, swaying on his feet.

"So help me I never turned it on. I was just gonna when I tripped over that stinkin' table—pardon, miss—and knocked myself cold on a corner of the juice-box. Take a look at this if you don't believe me. The next thing I know you was knocking at the door just now."

"This" was a large lump on Sweeney's nut-brown forehead, located halfway between eyebrow and temple. He stood there, staring at Eli defiantly, as if daring him to do something about it.

"The poor man's hurt," said Jeanne with quick sympathy. She led him skillfully to the sofa, sat him down, set about getting a damp cloth to relieve the swelling with silent efficiency. Sweeney moaned his thanks, evidently enjoying the attention he was getting.

For the first time in his life Burroughs saw Eli Fennister flabbergasted. The immaculately-groomed promoter stood silent, staring at his backstage genius, his mouth hanging open. He closed his mouth, opened it again, then sank abruptly into an armchair.

"You're crazy," he said. "It worked like a dream. You must have come part-way out of it, got it going, then turned it off again without knowing it. Come to think of it, it was a bit slow getting under way." His face cleared and the room was lit with his smile. "Good old Sweeney—that's what I call hitting in the clutch."

"But I didn't—I *couldn't*," protested the other. "When I fell and conked myself I knocked a leg of the sofa over part of my trousers. It was still there when your knocking woke me up. That's why I was so slow getting up to answer you. I had to move the—"

"You must have caught it when you collapsed after turning it off," Fennister assured him bluffly. "After all, Mike, you were—"

"I was out cold," Sweeney repeated. "Boss, I couldn't no more have put that thing on and off than I could have . . ." His voice trailed off as he looked again at Jeanne, then at Burroughs, taking

in their presence for the first time. Alarmed, he said, "How about these two? What are they doing in on this?"

"We're helping with the pitch," said Jeanne soothingly. Not entirely convinced Sweeney looked at Fennister, gave grudging acceptance to his nodded endorsement. Burroughs, who was leaning against the wall, suffering from something like panic, managed to smile.

WHAT, he was wondering, if Sweeney actually *hadn't* turned on the generator that made the "miracle" machine work? He remembered his own drifting moments all too well. It couldn't be possible—he knew that—but all the same it was frightening.

He caught Jeanne regarding him with a trace of anxiety and tried a gesture of reassurance. "It would have been a laugh if the dynaeramo *had* operated without Sweeney's generator here." He managed to come up with a chuckle but it sounded hollow even to him.

"It's no laugh," Sweeney protested angrily. "I ought to know when I'm out cold, oughtn't I? I'm telling you that I never turned the thing on—and I never turned it off either." He regarded them all suspiciously. "If this is a rib I think it's a stinking trick to try on a guy that's been out cold."

Jeanne said quietly, "Well, there's one sure way to find out. We can go up and see if the dynaeramo is still going. It was certainly on when we left just now."

They looked at each other in uneasy silence. Finally Eli Fennister spoke. "This is absurd, of course. How could it run if the generator wasn't on?" He glanced at Burroughs, added in less hurried tone, "Incidentally, Dale, it's a *very* neat gizmo. We've run an insulated printed circuit up under a seam in the wallpaper, through the ceiling and a crack in the floor above and through a tiny slit in the carpet."

"How does it hook up upstairs?" Burroughs asked, glad that the subject

had been switched to something more rational.

"There's another printed circuit running up a leg of the table that contacts a vent in the bottom of the box," Fennister went on proudly. "Even if they find them it's a good chance they won't know what they are—or tie them up with the demonstrations."

"Perpetual motion maybe—better check," said Jeanne. Eli Fennister looked at her with a puzzled frown. Burroughs grinned.

"She's talking about your 'box' still being on," he explained. "She thinks we'd better take a look at it anyway." After hearing Eli's explanation Burroughs felt more assured about it all.

"She's right, boss," croaked Sweeney, sitting up on the sofa. "I'm not kidding—I never turned it on and I never turned it off."

"Oh, all right, Mike," said Fennister with a loud sigh. He rose, straightened his cummerbund and moved toward the door. "The rest of you had better stay here," he told them. "We don't want to risk drawing attention to ourselves parading the halls in a body."

He peered outside, resembling a large pear with pants on from the rear. Then he slipped through the door and closed it silently behind him. Sweeney, evidently feeling better, looked first at Burroughs, then with more interest at Jeanne.

"You know my name," he informed them. "What's yours?"

"Sorry, Mr. Sweeney," said Jeanne amiably. She introduced Burroughs and herself, explained her role in the demonstration.

"You must be some daughter—to sit by and see your old man fleeced," said the mechanical genius bluntly.

"Oh, Daddy can afford to take a fleecing," she said serenely. "Besides, I'm annoyed with him. Montague—or is it Capulet?"

"I always get them mixed up too," Burroughs told her.

"Maybe I shouldn't have come to,"

complained Sweeney. "Are you tomatoes crazy or is it me? What sorta talk is that?"

"Sorry," said Burroughs. "It's personal. She doesn't like the way her father is treating me. He thinks I'm a tramp."

"*Hah!*" Sweeney's exclamation was expressive in the extreme. He added, "The boss told me about the way you handled him and . . ."

Five raps came on the door—softly but with a suggestion of urgency. Burroughs leapt to open it and Fennister tottered in. He leaned against it and said, "It's still going—full blast. I could hear it from the hall. The door was open and the place was full of cops. Come on, Mike, let's get the hell out of here."

"But that's impossible, boss," protested Sweeney. Burroughs felt a recurrence of the panic that had gripped him earlier. He had a dim vision of circuit arrangements that were part of a larger pattern. But it was no longer clear.

Another knock came at the door—and this one was not soft. "Open up," said a rough voice. "Open up in the name of the law!"

III

THEY were hustled back upstairs by a brace of plain-clothesmen. En route Sweeney growled, sotto voce, "I'd like to get my hooks on the sucker who squealed. I'd plant a gizmo in his—"

"Shut up, Mike," said Eli Fennister without rancor. He was still apparently more greatly shocked by the fact that the dynaeramo was running without a generator than by the fact of his arrest. And when they reached the upper suite Sweeney shared his perturbation. The warped genius' pickled-walnut face went ashy white.

For the machine was still thrumming with its tremendous and apparently sourceless power. A middle-sized unexpectedly well-dressed grey-haired man

with an almost apologetic manner gestured toward it before explaining the facts behind their arrest.

"It isn't really an arrest," he told them disarmingly. "I'm Jervis, electronics—with the F. B. I. for the time being."

"G-Men yet!" Mike Sweeney muttered hoarsely, sitting down.

"One of your—er—prospective clients, Mr. Fennister, suggested that we look into this—er—device of yours," Jervis went on. "He seemed to think that if it were successful it would come under defense regulations. And if it weren't . . ." He let his voice trail to tactful silence with the alternate suggestion.

Eli Fennister rallied. He cleared his throat loudly, looked around him at his official audience, said, "As you can see, Mr. Jervis, the dynaeramo functions as predicted. We did take certain precautionary measures—I believe your men have seen them in the suite beneath this—in case it proved difficult to start under test conditions. But it works surprisingly well as you can see for yourself. Naturally we have no intention of violating governmental security measures in any way. Therefore, if you will . . ."

Jeanne tugged at Burroughs' elbow to gain his attention. Her eyes were shining as she whispered, "Magnificent! What an old—"

"False-front Edison," Burroughs whispered in reply. He could not help but admire the veteran con-man's unruffled aplomb. Incredibly, within seconds, the detectives were no longer with them. Jervis, frowning slightly, moved the table containing the dynaeramo, conducted a number of superficial checks on its functioning.

"I don't believe it," he said finally. "It's true but it's impossible." He looked sharply at Fennister. "You say that this—this dynaeramo uses the air itself as a power source?"

"Obviously," Fennister replied, still serene. "Since there is no other source

available it must."

"But how?" exploded the government scientist. "How, man?"

"I think you'd better consult my colleague, Mr. Sweeney, for information as to the more technical details," Eli spoke loftily.

"It's no good, boss," said the walnut-faced wizard, his voice shrill above the unceasing thrum of the machine. "It won't work." He turned to Jervis and got to his feet. "Mister, I rigged this gizmo strictly for a sucker pitch. It shouldn't work without the power is on downstairs. But it does—how I wouldn't know."

It took a full moment for the implications to sink in. Then Jervis exploded again. "But merciful heavens, man, this is . . ."

"You said it, chief," said Sweeney laconically. "It can't."

For a brief period the lights in the suite dimmed, then went on again at full strength. The argument and incredulity caused by Sweeney's statements continued without a letup. At Jervis' request Sweeney turned the off-switch. Nothing happened save that the loud thrum, the whirling of gears went on unabated.

Jervis turned then on Burroughs and Jeanne, asked who they were and what they were doing among those present. When Burroughs had explained the official suggested, politely, that it might be wiser for them to leave—since any knowledge they might gain could easily prove to be awkward for them later.

Burroughs, who had not strayed far from the cellarette and had been doing some heavy speculative thinking, eyed his glass and said, "You should have the dial of your watch cleaned, Mr. Jervis—and get a new crystal to protect it from future dirt."

UNCONSCIOUSLY the scientist pulled a timepiece from one of his waistcoat pockets. He stared at it stupidly, then looked frostily at the former tennis player. "If this is some

sort of trick or joke it seems singularly out of place," he remarked angrily.

"Sorry, Jervis," said Burroughs. "It's no joke. I have E. S. P."

"I might have looked at it a dozen times in this room."

"But you didn't," Burroughs told him. Something inside himself drove him on. "Furthermore your garters don't match."

"Very clever, I'm sure," said the scientist, really annoyed. "But just how this is going to help us solve the mystery of what makes this machine work I wouldn't know. *E. S. P.*!" Explosively.

"It may have everything to do with it," Burroughs told him. "I'm not trying to be funny." He paused a moment, then said, "Mr. Jervis, you've been looking for a twenty-dollar bill you mislaid a week ago last Saturday. You'll find it in the watch pocket of your dinner pants in your closet. Call your wife if you don't believe—"

"Okay," said the mystified electronics expert. "I've heard of E. S. P., of course. If you're right . . . But I still don't see how it ties up with this—this!" He gestured toward the machine, then went into the other room to telephone and shut the door behind him.

"*Darling!*" said Jeanne and there was an odd excited light in her eyes. "You didn't tell me that you—"

"I never told anybody," Burroughs replied. "It isn't the sort of thing I want generally known. But it's true."

"Pearl earring," said Jeanne, looking at him confidently. He poured himself a drink, downed it, rubbed his forehead hard.

"Shore," he said. "Under porch—big building. Near corner." He looked at her. "Does that give you anything?"

"Maybe," she said. "Oh, Dale, if it does it means—"

She was interrupted by the emergence of Mr. Jervis from the bedroom. He looked slightly dazed. He nodded to Burroughs. "You hit it," he said. "I've heard of these things but I never expected—"

"It doesn't always work," Burroughs told him honestly. "Conditions have to be right. They were right when Eli here set up his machine. I could sense that it wasn't getting power—at the same time that it had some larger function than was originally intended."

He hesitated, then added, "I've never done anything like it before but I got to concentrating and all of a sudden it was clear and the machine was doing its stuff. Then when we found out about Mike Sweeney's accident downstairs and that the power never was on . . ."

"You mean you think this—this device functions out of a psi quality hook-up?" said Mr. Jervis, astonished. He shook his head. "At that it doesn't make sense any other way."

The telephone shrilled above the steady thrumming. Jervis picked it up, listened, said, "What's *that?*" His voice was sharp. He listened some more, asked a few more questions, hung up grimly.

"I don't know how it *got* going or how it *keeps* going but we've got to put a stop to it. That's a call from Field Headquarters. Ever since this damned thing started there's been a steady drain on every bit of electric power in Midland City. If we don't put it out of action within fifteen minutes there won't be a kilowatt left in the entire area."

As he spoke the lights in the suite went dim again—and this time they did not flash back to normal brightness.

Mike Sweeney again uncoiled himself from a chair. He said, "Well, if we gotta, we gotta. It means wrecking the gizmo."

"Dammit, man, be *careful!*" Jervis almost shouted. "If that thing has been picking up voltage enough to drain the city it's charged. You'll electrocute us all!"

"Not me—and not *that* gizmo," said Sweeney. "Maybe she's picked up the power like your man says but she ain't built to hold it." Casually he picked up a bottle from the cellarette and, before anyone could stop him, dealt swift

hard accurate blows at the plastic cover, which shattered beneath their force.

Moments later the machine was a shattered ruin, its shards strewn over the carpet. Sweeney, bottle in hand, surveyed the wreckage mournfully. Then, with a shrug, he uncorked the bottle and lifted it to his wrinkled lips.

Jervis sank into a chair, white-faced, shaking, almost pitiful. "Damn you, Sweeney, or whatever your name is!" he exclaimed. "You may have destroyed the most important discovery since the atom was fissionized. Do you realize the odds against putting ano—"

"I got another—downstairs," said Sweeney laconically. He put the bottle again to his lips, peered around it at the government man. "Better see if the power is still being drained."

The following morning, in the big house on the elm-fringed outskirts of Midland City which Marcus Colden called home, the atmosphere was decidedly chilly at breakfast. Burroughs, a late sleeper by both nature and habit, came downstairs to breakfast to find Jeanne and her father already finished.

"I don't know what sort of a fellow you really are, Burroughs," said the millionaire, regarding the younger man as if he were something impaled on a card with a pin. "But I've put up with you because my daughter, for some reason, is fond of you. However, I'll not have you dragging her into scandal of any sort."

"Come again, sir?" said Burroughs, looking from Jeanne to her father in bewilderment. Jeanne made a face at him and he said to her, "Goody for you—I love you too."

"And furthermore I wish you'd talk some comprehensible form of English in my presence," Mr. Colden went on. He sighed. "It seems you have involved both my daughter and yourself with the F. B. I. At any rate there's a man waiting in the living room."

FIVE minutes later Burroughs and Jeanne were being driven back into

Midland City. They were taken up to the penthouse suite atop the Midland Park Hotel, where Eli Fennister, Sweeney, Jervis and a distinguished looking elderly gentleman with a pepper-and-salt Vandyke beard were awaiting them.

"Before we conduct the experiment," said Jervis, nodding toward the table upon which Sweeney's duplicate dynaeramo reposed enigmatically in its black outer casing, "Dr. Meuse wishes to ask you a few questions, Burroughs." He performed the introductions.

"I've read your books," Burroughs told the famed E. S. P. authority. "They have affected my life considerably."

"I've studied your backhand," said the professor, smiling, "but it has yet to improve mine. I hope my books were more useful in your case. Mr. Jervis informs me that you have a remarkable psi capacity. Would you care to tell me about it?"

Burroughs hesitated, looked around, then decided to level off. After all they had all seen it in operation the evening before. As he told of his experiences he caught excitement in Jeanne's comely countenance, disbelief in Sweeney's, growing suspicion in Eli Fennister's. Jervis' face was impassive.

"Would you be willing to put your talent to the test for me—before we try it again on the machine?" Dr. Meuse inquired.

"I don't feel very psi right now," Burroughs told him. "Usually it works better either with fatigue or alcohol or both."

"I think we can give you some help," said Dr. Meuse. Burroughs sighed, rolled his eyes at Jeanne, then rose and approached the cellarette. At the moment he wanted a drink about as much as he wanted a camel for a house pet. He swallowed hard.

"Go ahead, honey," Jeanne told him. "I understand."

"Do I have to?" Burroughs looked pleadingly at Jervis.

"If you don't Washington may come

up with something a lot less pleasant," the official told him grimly.

Burroughs filled his glass, shuddered, then said, "For God, for country and to keep out of jail." Somehow he got it down.

Forty minutes later he drained a tumbler, looked at Professor Meuse and nodded. Jeanne, who had taken a couple of drinks with him, giggled and said, "Poor darling."

The E. S. P. expert unveiled a deck of special cards. They were of the standard test variety—five suits of five card each, marked with squares, circles, wavy lines and so on. While Burroughs had read and heard of them it was his first actual experience.

A table was set up and a barrier, like a high solid-wood ping-pong net, raised across its middle. Dr. Meuse sat on one side of it and began to turn over the cards one by one. On the other side Burroughs wrote them down as he thought they appeared.

On the first try he got fifteen right—on his second, eleven. Then, warming to the job, he got seventeen, twenty-three, nineteen, and then called them all right three times in a row. When he had finished Dr. Meuse rose, staring at him in amazement.

"Remarkable!" he said. "The most developed E. S. P. talent it has been my privilege to encounter in twenty-five years of constant experiment. Mr. Burroughs, I congratulate you."

"You mean he can call cards without seeing them?" Eli Fennister's voice was a silken rumble, laced with incredulity.

"You have just seen him do it," said Dr. Meuse.

"I'll be triple-damned!" said Fennister. He sounded a trifle breathless. "Then that means he . . ." He broke off, eyed Burroughs with narrowed eyes, murmured, "No wonder I didn't have a chance."

"What's the gimmick?" Mike Sweeney wanted to know.

"Sorry, Mike," Burroughs told him.

"No gimmick at all."

"Now," said Jervis, approaching the dynaeramo. "Now that we have seen a demonstration of Mr. Burroughs' amazing talent, let us put it to more practical use."

"Wait a minute," said the former tennis star. "If it should work by some freak, how are you going to turn it off?"

"I've got it rigged," said Sweeney scornfully. Burroughs moved across to Jeanne, sat beside her. Her hand felt warm and alive in his. She brushed his near temple with her lips.

"Make a tangerine-head out of me," he told her, eyeing her lipstick. She made a face at him, squeezed his hand.

"I'm a little frightened," she told him softly.

"You and me both," he told her. "How about another drink?"

"You go ahead, Dale. I don't want any more now."

He took one and once again Eli Fennister got the fabulous machine into operation. Burroughs, feeling half-tight, tried to relax and let his psi qualities take control of him once more.

It was not easy. He put a hand over his eyes as he sought once more to visualize the larger function he had been able to sense in the dynaeramo less than twenty-four hours earlier. It was slow in coming and after awhile he risked taking another drink. He had a feeling that his psi quality was not in tune with the artificial endeavor to recreate yesterday's conditions.

He began to get it, fuzzily and with great effort, but it refused to come clearly. Furthermore there was none of that almost terrifying sense of being abetted and pulled along by some other personality which had assailed him the day before. He sensed its presence but that was all. Gradually he lost all contact.

"Sorry," he said finally. "I guess it's no go."

"I was afraid of it," said Dr. Meuse, his face deeply lined with his disappointment. "It's the unreliability of the

psi qualities that makes them such a heartbreaking subject for study."

IV

TWO hours later, although somewhat restored physically by a breakfast of minute steak, potatoes O'Brien and milk, Burroughs felt more or less like an old felt inner sole discarded because of over-use from an ancient pair of Russian winter boots. Attempt number two to get the machine working via his psi qualities had failed ignominiously and he was being graciously granted a breather.

Unhappily he watched Jeanne mix herself a dry martini at the cellarette, a function in which she was joined by Mike Sweeney. Burroughs' tongue curled up like a fuzzy anchovy at the sight and he turned his head away so as not to watch it. At the moment he wished only that Prohibition had taken and stuck for good.

"Don't look so sad, honey," said Jeanne, coming over to him. "After all, you couldn't help it. You're still E. S. P. to me."

"Idle drifter," said Burroughs. "Father won't like." He meant that, had he succeeded, he might at least have offered more appeal to Marcus Colden, if of a highly marginal, not to say freakish nature.

"Pooh!" said Jeanne, ruffling his hair. "Las Vegas."

"You mean it?" At her nod Burroughs decided he felt better. He had been trying to get Jeanne to elope with him for months now but she had steadfastly insisted on doing things her father's way.

"We've got bond now—special bond," the girl told him, her eyes liquid on his. She was, he decided, getting a little tight. He decided against saying anything about it. Jeanne reacted to any restrictive measures like the proverbial wild mare. There was, he thought, no point in pressing his luck so far.

"If we ever get out of here," he said.

"Anytime," she replied secretively. "Jeanne knows a way."

Eli Fennister broke it up. He and Jervis had been listening to the eerie dialogue with obvious and increasing irritation. Dr. Meuse, exhausted, was taking a nap in the bedroom. The promoter, clearing his throat as usual before launching himself into speech, said, "Er—Dåle, I'd like to test my own E. S. P. qualities. Would you be willing to run through the cards for me at the table?"

"Why not?" said Burroughs. With returning sobriety he was feeling boredom, fatigue. Jeanne looked at him, then at Fennister, who had pulled a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles from his breast pocket. She opened her mouth to speak, closed it abruptly.

Burroughs went to the barrier-table. He said, "Ready, Eli?"

"Ready," said the promoter from the other side of the barrier. Burroughs ran through the deck slowly and Fennister wrote down what he thought each card was as it was turned up. He called his results when the deal was finished out and Burroughs checked it against the laid-down cards.

"Lordy!" Burroughs exclaimed when the deal was finished. To his amazement Old Eli had called twenty-three of them correctly.

"Perhaps the gift is not so rare," said Eli smugly.

"Try it again," said Jeanne unexpectedly. She had been looking on from the sidelines, glass in hand.

They did it again. Again Fennister called out his guesses—if guesses they were—when the deal was completed. He got the first four right and then, inexplicably, began to call all of them wrong. Eyes on the deck Burroughs wondered what had happened. It seemed as unlikely for the older man to lose his gift so suddenly and completely as it had for him to be so near right the first time.

From the corner of his eye Burroughs sensed a flicker of swift movement. Eli Fennister was still calling them out.

Mark lifted his eyes from the just-called card and his jaw dropped. Without any physical agent in evidence the cards themselves were reshuffling, moving with the near-invisible speed of a sharper's trick cut.

All at once he felt a tugging within him, the tugging of that other personality which had preceded the successful demonstration of the dynaeramo the previous afternoon. Almost wildly he looked about him, seeking its source.

Sweeney was busily preparing himself a new drink. Jervis was cleaning his nails with a pocket manicure device. Jeanne was—he did a double take. She was standing in the middle of the room, swaying slightly, her eyes half-closed, apparently in a trance.

BURROUGHS got to his feet so quickly that he jolted the table. Fennister's spectacles, which he had laid down close to the edge, fell to the carpet. Instinctively the younger man stooped to pick them up, checked them to see that they were not broken.

He saw the little concave mirrors fitted at their bow corners to serve as periscope mirrors, handed them back to Fennister with a half-smile. He said, "You couldn't even play *this* one straight, could you, Eli?"

"Do *you* call it straight—using that trick gift of yours to fleece me the way you did, young man?" the promoter said angrily.

"I was employing a natural gift—not a gimmick," Burroughs told him, motioned him to silence and took Jeanne by the shoulders and shook her gently but with firm conviction. "You little devil!" he said softly. "So it was *you*—why in hell didn't you tell a guy?"

"Why didn't you?" she replied. There was no answer to that. Suddenly both of them began to grin, then to laugh. Somehow it was a relief to know that neither of them was going to have to go through life hiding a special wild talent from the other.

"Telekinetic!" he said, chuckling.

"How long?"

"I used to get my dolls to come to bed with me by themselves when I was tottish," said the girl. Anxiety, which had been weighing down both of them like the proverbial pall, was lifted.

"What's going on?" said Jervis, looking up from his nail-fixing operation and regarding them with open bewilderment.

"Get Dr. Meuse in here," said Burroughs. "I think we've finally got the answer. Me—I'm going to have me another drink."

The professor, red of eye and yawning, came in wanting to know what had happened. But Burroughs, holding Jeanne close against him, insisted they try out the dynaeramo again first. He wanted to make sure he was right before he did any talking.

He and Jeanne exchanged a long glance as the starter battery hummed into life, then concentrated on the task before them. Once again, slowly, Burroughs felt the curtain lift. Vividly he saw the larger import of Mike Sweeney's random circuit arrangement—although he could now tell that it was far from random.

Sweeney, apparently unknown to himself, was possessed of a definite psi quality—which ranged well beyond the bounds of known electronics. It was small wonder he had won a rating for genius amid the demi-mundane circles in which he made his life.

Burroughs forgot about Sweeney as he felt himself once more picked up and pulled along with another personality. Somehow, knowing that it was Jeanne made it much clearer and more compelling. He let the tide sweep over him and carry him with it.

When he came out of it the dynaeramo was thrumming its steady powerful sound as it had the day before. He and Jeanne shook hands and kissed, then got up, prepared to face the others, who were looking with dazed expressions from them to the machine.

"Better turn it off," said Burroughs, "if you can."

Sweeney snorted and approached the machine and made a quick adjustment. The thrum died and, slowly, the dyna-ramo slowed down and ceased to function. Dr. Meuse approached the young couple, said, "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to hear an explanation."

"It takes both of us, that's all," Burroughs told him. "We didn't find it out until just now, when Jeanne began to move the cards around from a distance. She's a telekinetic—I'm E. S. P. Together our powers seem to be cubed or something."

"Telekinesis—of course!" murmured the scientist. "E. S. P. for insight, T. K. for action—naturally it would take both powers. Young lady—and young man—I hope you realize what a rare combination of powers you possess. I trust you will use them wisely. Perhaps you will consent to spending some time at the University so that my assistants and I can study your remarkable talents."

"Not until Uncle Sam is through with them," said Jervis, rousing himself from his own reverie. "None of you seem to realize the full implications of this discovery. A power drain like this—operating in the territory of potential enemies once we have determined its effective radius—would be more valuable and a lot less likely to cause trouble than a whole vault full of H-Bombs."

"Now we're secret weapons, Dale," said Jeanne. "Goody!"

"He means it," Burroughs told her almost grimly. Then, "Fix your brassiere. One of the straps is slipping."

"How can a girl have any secrets?" she wailed.

"I wish," murmured Jervis plaintively, "that I knew where this damned machine sent this power it attracts. It must go somewhere—it can't just evaporate into nothing."

"It does," said Burroughs, frowning. "It's a little hard for me to express but I caught a sort of glimpse of it just now while we were getting it going again. It's a sort of other place, co-existing with our own. I'm afraid I didn't get a very

clear idea of it."

"Other place?" Jervis, as always, was serious. Then, suddenly, his face cleared. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "It doesn't seem likely—but it *could* be. And no other explanation fits so far."

"What are you talking about?" Professor Meuse was nettled.

"The to-date theoretical existence of a something called sub-space," the government man replied. "It's got to be something like that. We'd have detected any other sudden outlet by now."

THERE were telephone calls then, a larger inrush of officialdom. Burroughs and Jeanne, despite the outraged roars of Marcus Colden, were held virtually incommunicado. Two days later, with Eli Fennister, Sweeney, Jervis and Dr. Meuse, they were flown, in company with the dyna-ramo, to a highly secret government testing laboratory on the West Coast. There they succeeded temporarily in putting a pair of cyclotrons forty miles away out of action through a drying up of the source of power.

It was a full fortnight before they returned to Midland City and walked in on Marcus Colden, who was waiting impatiently in the study of his home. Burroughs, who had been a navigator captain in the AAF during World War Two, was wearing a light blue uniform with a lieutenant colonel's silver leaf on each shoulder strap. Jeanne, in uniform of similar color but of different cut, wore captain's bars.

"I don't pretend to understand it," said her father after greeting them with anxious relief. "Uniforms or no, I can't say I approve of the two of you tearing around the country together like this." He sighed, added, "I only hope you'll be happy, daughter."

"Oh, I am!" cried the girl, giving him a hug. "I'm an honest woman, daddy—look." She held out her left hand, which was adorned with both engagement and wedding rings. "We stopped off in Las Vegas as soon as they let us loose."

"You've got rings under your eyes

too, Jeanne," he said parentally. He sniffed. "And you smell as if you'd been drinking."

"She has," Burroughs told his father-in-law. "But believe me, sir, it isn't the way you think. We *have* to drink. The government doctors seem to think it won't do us any permanent damage."

Marcus Colden sank into an armchair and stared at them. Finally he said, "I think perhaps you'd better get Willis to bring us some champagne, Dale. It seems to be an occasion—and I think I need a drink myself."

* * * * *

Neither Burroughs nor his bride was feeling any pain—or the cold of the Central Asiatic night—when they returned, unsteadily, to the waiting helicopter on the mountainside. Behind them, apparently from the ground, came the thrumming of the dynaeramo.

"All set?" the pilot asked them as they stumbled into the cabin and Burroughs slammed the door shut. As he got the engines started he muttered something about "Operation crackpot."

"'T seems incredible," Jeanne murmured fuzzily. "Jus' th' two'v us shtoppin' all those big machines—all by 'r selves."

"You're drunk, Captain," Burroughs told her. "Better sleep it off." He hated the restrictions of the bucket seats, which kept them apart for the moment. Again he thought, "What a honeymoon!"

They reached Karachi without incident and Burroughs and Jeanne, who had slept all the way back, adjourned to quarters, there to await results. They had planted Sweeney's amazing machine in the center of a fifty-mile radius that contained some of the most vital atomic installations in the entire world.

If the dynaeramo failed to perform its power-draining function properly, there would have to be a second trip. Sweeney, now in government service, was manufacturing more of the big

black boxes, both for study and practical application.

For almost ten days the newlyweds had a chance to honeymoon in the exotic surroundings of northern India. Then at last they were summoned before the ranking officer of the base.

"Reports are beginning to come over the frontier," he told them. "I can tell you now that your operation has been an unqualified success. Every major power station within the radius has been utterly without power for almost a week. Our—er—friends are evidently frantic. They are beginning to show their dismay in official channels. I'd like very much to shake your hands."

Since he had been one of the chief scoffers at the project Burroughs was glad to be gracious. When it was over he said, "Now perhaps Jeanne and I can go home and begin a normal life."

The high officer looked at them and regretfully shook his bald head. "I'm afraid not quite yet," he informed them. "You see, we have to be sure. And until then we'll have to keep you in pretty close quarters. If *they* ever found out about you I don't have to warn you what steps would be taken."

Jeanne grinned and hugged her husband's arm. "Close quarters?" she said. "We don't care, do we, honey?"

Burroughs grinned back, shook his head. Then, "But once things have calmed down," he said, "we'll be on our own?"

"It doesn't look that way," said the officer sadly. "The President is planning ultimately to turn you over to the U. N. As a war preventative you're a lot more effective than an armed international police force." He regarded them with a half-smile, added, "Unique, isn't it?"

His paperweight rose from the desk in front of him and struck him sharply in the left eye. He yelped, covered it with both hands while regarding them balefully with his remaining good orb.

Jeanne smiled at him sweetly. "So sorry," she said. "My T. K. seems to have slipped."

A Thesis for BRANDERBOOK

By CHARLES L. HARNESS

Everest offered fewer terrors than the mysterious tower of Quais, but young Varion has more than a PhD. at stake!

THE last of the stunted thorn trees gave way and, peering through the dark blue of dawn, Frank Varion found that he had finally reached the summit of the slope. Below him stretched the thorn-forest and beyond that, on a strip of rock-strewn desert, a jeep bearing the legend Archeology Department, Columbia University.

He threw himself on a flat slab of diorite and breathed deeply for a moment. He had hardly felt the exertion of the climb up the plateau face and his lungs were heaving now from excite-

ment rather than from exertion. However he knew that he must rest periodically or he might never complete the tremendous ascent that still lay before him—compared to which the plateau face was a mere sand dune.

The incredible Tower of Qais was his own discovery. Not only would it serve as subject matter for his Ph. D. thesis under old Branderbook—it would throw a bombshell into archeological theory in general and one old Germanic legend in particular—the story known as Dorn-röschen—Little Thorn Rose. Or, as it

The Corkscrew Stairway

ONCE again we are admitting a bare-faced and utterly implausible fantasy to the ranks of our more usual pseudo-scientific stories. We last let down the bars for C. H. Liddell's ODYSSEY OF YIGGAR THROLG in the January SS and managed to survive without loss either of our lives or our readers.

Mr. Harness, of course, can write science fiction with the very best. Theories drip from his gifted fingertips, ranging from Ptolemaic to Toynbeeic, and he has a rare flair for cutting bizarrely animated patterns from the very web of the space-time continuum.

But in this instance he has found himself caught in the toils of the same magic which Walt Disney converted so magnificently into *Snow White*—we'll omit the Seven Dwarfs (or is it Dwarves?) this time out. Employing the dry detachment of the mid-twentieth-century scientific observer, Mr. Harness has not deviated one step from the corkscrew stairway of magic himself. And, after all, magic is beyond doubt the most essential single element of science fiction. So—shoot if you must but read the story before you press the trigger.

—THE EDITOR.



Varion's knife clove the air at the great vulture's neck

was better known to English and American schoolchildren, the Sleeping Beauty.

He believed he could prove the Germans had acquired the legend from the Muslims during the crusades. The sentimental Teutons, he was convinced, had disinfected the story and made it palatable for small children at bedtime. The few ancient Arabian manuscripts he had found on the subject were less sparing of the reader's nerves.

Varion had his own opinion of its dangers. In his first reconnaissance he had studied the tower carefully through binoculars. It was not really a single

tower. A lone tower so high could not have withstood the onslaught of the mighty winds that swept that desolate plateau.

Instead it was a consolidated profusion of beetling spires and turrets, large as a city at the base but gradually and gracefully diminishing until at last, soaring terrifically into the grey sky, it culminated in a lone thread-like minaret invisible to the naked eye.

The upper third of the tower swayed and vibrated in the cyclonic gales of that breath-taking height and the young archeologist believed that this vibration

had hurtled previous adventurers over the stone balustrade to bloody death. True, the Ibad manuscript, written by an observant traveler of the thirteenth century, claimed that the bones of the gallant unfortunates had been strangely gnawed.

But Varion attributed this to scavenging jackals. His only real concern was the wind. To make sure he was not flung over the balustrade he carried with him a long coil of thin but strong rope, intending to tie himself to the railing from time to time when the gales were bad.

HIS remaining equipment consisted of a miniature camera and a long knife of hardened silver which his friend, the Librarian of Alexandria, had pressed upon him half seriously. It was supposed to be effective against vampires, ghouls and were-creatures. Varion smiled now at the thought.

Buttoning his old G. I. jacket against the stiff morning breeze he picked his way through the rubble of stones, bones, rusting armor and gnarled roots that blanketed the ancient courtyard. Finally standing before the wide stair entrance, he took a couple of shots with his camera, shifted his rope coil to the other shoulder and began his climb.

No spectators watched the beginning of his ascent—at least none that he saw. The bravest Bedouin never ventured there. The ancient contorted thorn trees seemed constantly to murmur with sardonic voices and the shepherds in the valley said that strange shapes could sometimes be seen moving in the forest margin. Its grim legend had preserved the privacy of the tower from all but the very brave and the very curious.

Varion made the first circuit of the spiral stairs without mishap. Not infrequently he dislodged the bones of those who had attempted the great climb and had failed. Once a skull, bleached by the unrelenting sun, clattered ominously past him down the incline.

Creepers like monstrous pythons

writhed up the tower walls and rattled their dull red fronds sullenly in the rising wind. Varion crushed a questing tendril with his heel, and left behind him a crimson blot and the odor of half-digested blood. He frowned uncomprehendingly but gave the next creeper a wide berth. Climbing slowly the archeologist completed the second coil of the spiral.

He examined the material of which the tower was constructed. It was no common stone. Even the greatest monoliths would have crumbled like chalk beneath the unimaginable weight of this cloud-brushing edifice. It was a gem-like stuff—strangely resilient, yet extremely hard. He attempted to scratch it with his ruby ring and was unpleasantly surprised when the jewel splintered in his face.

Varion passed the third and fourth volutions. He was now far above the thorn forest, which resembled a green fungus carpet. Each spiral was a little shorter than its predecessor as the stair wound eternally upward. He was tiring as he entered the sixth coil. A dull pain closed about his heart and his legs were becoming very heavy.

Overhead the leaves of the monstrous creepers rustled with singular violence. He assumed this was due to the rising wind until a glistening sliver of bone dropped almost at his feet. He bent to touch it and found that it was wet.

He then looked overhead and beheld a number of things. The first was that the succeeding whorl of the spiral, far above, narrowed unaccountably for the space of some seven or eight yards and that along this stretch there was no balustrade. He would have to give that crossing all his attention. And as he stared upward Varion thought he saw yellow eyes glare down at him through the creepers. They vanished almost instantly, however, so he could not be sure. Perhaps some frightened forest animal . . .

He climbed the sixth volute warily and reached the constriction. Clambering

over a heap of bones and rusting metal, he searched the near side of the narrowed shelf of stairs but saw only a massive suit of glittering armor. It had been curiously shattered. Varion slowly mounted the intervening steps. As he advanced, he seemed to hear very faintly, as from the inmost recesses of the tower, thin strains of sardonic laughter. The wind was playing tricks on his ears.

Then an incredible thing happened. From the opposite side of the narrowed ledge and from beyond the turn of the stair he heard a hollow impatient snarl. A few moments later there came a venomous cough, followed by a vicious rustle of the creepers—and suddenly a gigantic black panther loomed into majestic view.

It was five feet at the shoulder—so huge that its glossy hide would have turned the sharpest blade. Its yellow eyes flamed like jewels as it padded relentlessly toward the narrow ledgeway.

As the archeologist stared numbly the monster sat down calmly across the passageway, licked both paws and studied its next meal with malicious interest.

Trying hard to conceal the rattle in his throat Varion slipped the coil of rope from his shoulder and made two or three turns around the mass of armor that teetered on the edge of the stair.

The great cat crouched low. Its tail lashed febrilely. At the other end of the rope Varion fashioned a running noose. He was not an instant too soon.

IN one fleeting second there came an eternity of action. Varion jammed his elbow into the mass of armor, waited a fraction of a heart-beat and then, crouching low, shot his lasso across the intervening space. It encircled the neck of the mighty beast—just as it leaped from the ledge. Then followed something curious and horrible—the mass of armor plunged downward, crashed upon the balustrade of the lower whorl, ricocheted into the air and drew the rope taut with a terrific crack.

The impact caught the animal in the middle of its leap and jerked it away bodily, as a child might yank a pebble with a string. There was no resisting the impetus of that hurtling mass of metal. With a single choking yowl the great beast shot out into the void.

Varion listened while the seconds passed. Finally, from far, far below, there was wafted up a faint sullen roar.

He found himself dripping with sweat and trembling in every limb. He sat down with his back to the tower and panted heavily. His first thought was that he would have done well to have brought a weapon. Even an elephant gun would not have been too ambitious.

However, he felt he had nothing more to fear. The huge animal had undoubtedly kept other fauna from the ruins. He'd have to remember to take a picture and measurements of the great beast on his return. Otherwise no one would believe him. Was the creature a remnant of some dead-end evolutionary process? He could only guess.

Time was passing faster than he had expected. It was now nearly noon. He was not exactly afraid—yet he did not care to have dusk overtake him before he completed his journey. He forced himself to his feet.

Later, as he crossed the narrow ledgeway, he seemed to hear peals of thin malevolent laughter deep within the tower. It was the wind, of course, but it was getting on his nerves.

Regaining the security of the balustrade he began stolidly to climb whorl after whorl. It became deathly cold and even the pounding exertion did not keep him warm. Dull shooting pains sank like barbs into his legs.

Varion was toiling up the twentieth volutation when he heard the beating of giant wings. A great black shadow enveloped him for a moment, then vanished. He looked up quickly but saw nothing moving, except a great mass of hungry creepers far overhead, clinging to a narrow ledge in the twenty-first volute. That whorl, for the space of

five yards, narrowed to almost nothing and, as in the coil far below, there was no accompanying balustrade.

Varion frowned and became very thoughtful.

Slowly he plodded up the remaining stairs. Reaching the place of stricture he deliberately stumbled in the matted creepers and fell with his left arm shielding his eyes, his right hand clutching his silver knife inside his jacket. He waited and the gigantic shadow passed again, bearing with it an insufferable stench.

The cold was numbing the scientist's brain and the ravening tendrils were beginning to fasten to his legs. He must force the issue at once. He crawled out on the narrow ledge and there assumed the same position as before—left arm over his eyes, right hand clutching his knife.

Again the shadow came and circled unhurriedly. Once it dipped so low that the tip of a feather brushed the man's lips. The creepers were now drawing blood and the intense cold was deadening all his faculties. He must act.

Carelessly he dropped his left arm, thus unveiling his eyes, and again waited. So precariously was he poised that a single incautious movement would have sent him hurtling into space. His eyes became thin slits as he watched for the return of the shadow. Once more it came, accompanied by the beating of mighty wings and a horrid smell.

And, as he had expected, Varion saw a gigantic vulture with a vile ruff of feathers about its reptilian neck. He saw a barbed beak and great agate eyes that reflected Hell itself.

He repressed a shudder and lay perfectly still.

Then the cruel beak neared the man's head, hesitated a moment and lunged straight for his eyes. Varion's knife clove the air, shearing the neck just below the ruff.

For a single breathless instant the great bird seemed turned into stone. Then blood spurted from the severed

arteries, the powerful wings collapsed and with a monstrous *swish* the body dropped into the gulf. Varion listened intently but he could not hear the subsequent crash.

Reaction seized him. He lay for moments, gasping for breath while mists, tower and sky whirled around and around. Finally, ready to sob with weariness, he crawled along the narrow ledge inch by inch until he reached the safety of the balustrade. There he tore the remaining tendrils from his bleeding legs. He grasped the coping to draw himself up and then received a shock that almost sent him over the edge.

ON THE third step lay the severed head of the great vulture. The eyes had not closed and the leprous thing was staring at him with unspeakable mockery. Varion, in a spasm of disgust, caught it with his heel and sent it spinning over the side.

As he did so, peals of hollow laughter welled out from the mighty tower walls. The wind had lulled momentarily and this time there could be no doubt.

The hair on the nape of his neck slowly stood out.

He suddenly understood that he had that day killed two very formidable unearthly creatures. Two guardians of the stairs—two watchers. That meant that the fable of the sleeping Qais—and her *Three Watchers*—might just possibly be true.

His academic mind refused to accept it. But then, he thought of the bones, so strangely gnawed, which he had seen in the courtyard and on the stairs.

He gripped his knife tighter. Should he attempt to return? Night would overtake him on the stairs if he retreated. Also, he was nearer the minaret than the ground. He took a deep breath and began to climb again.

Whorl after whorl he ascended while the writhing mists plucked at him with icy fingers and the nauseous creepers chattered with inhuman voices.

The sun was yellow in the west. The

mass of spires and casements far below seemed too tiny to be real. They faded away in the great distance, finally blending into the somber grey of forest and desert.

He came at last to the base of the minaret and began the final stage of his climb. A strained myopic stare contorted his face. A heavy fog swirled before him and he was compelled to feel his way. He forgot the purpose of his venture, why he carried a knife, even his name. His mind was a guttering candle.

Deaf and nearly blind from the thousand crimson lights searing his eyes, with blood spurting from his ears, he reeled up the inexorable stairs. A score of times he felt numbly of his knife. He could not recall its purpose. His senses were too deadened even to cast it away. His camera was shattered in its dangling case and the film trailed from it forlornly.

Something seemed to walk by his side—a something that laughed and jeered. Varion cackled vacuously and began to crawl on his hands and knees.

So high was he, so terrifically hard did the winds blow, of such resilient material was the tower constructed, that the minaret began to sway in the gale. The rhythmic vibrations tossed Varion from one side of the stairway to the other, repeatedly hurling his bleeding body against the balustrade.

Sanity was beaten back into him. From a stumbling automaton he changed slowly back into a human being. Wiping the red froth from his lips he looked up and, observing that the whorl overhead was the last, stood erect and laughed.

Clutching the coping of the balustrade in order to keep his balance he crept slowly up the stairs. As he climbed he frowned, for he seemed to have a dim recollection of something that had glided by his side and jeered at him.

The spiral ended at last and he found himself before a low narrow door made of polished woods, hung on hinges carved into grotesque devices.

He set up a vicious skirl on the brazen knocker.

There was no response.

Warily he pushed open the portal. A rush of warm air greeted him, nothing more. Knife in hand, Varion stepped boldly into a room luxurious with silken hangings and exotic furnishings. He gazed about him wonderingly while the warmth drove the chill from his blood. Then from behind a purple arras he heard footfalls and, as he watched tensely, the fabric moved slightly.

His heart began to pound. He licked his lips and tightened his grip on his knife.

As Varion stared almost in agony, the hangings suddenly parted and there stepped out a tall sad man clad in black velvet. A jeweled sword swung at his side and he toyed languidly with a red flower.

"So you have come at last," he sighed. "I have been expecting you."

Varion palmed his knife for throwing. "Indeed?"

"Ah, yes," returned the doleful one with another profound sigh. "And I must congratulate you"—he sniffed lazily at his flower—"upon the neat and efficacious—ah, yes, *very* efficacious way in which you disposed of the First and Second Watchers of the Stairs."

"And yet," said Varion, eyeing grimly the small red trident on the other's white brow, "I have found no trace of the Third Watcher—my noble emir!"

"So you recognize me? Then I suppose you'll insist on a Third Watcher. You keynote your era. The eager traveler determined to miss nothing. No sense of moderation. But it's all for the best, isn't it?" He scanned the archeologist impersonally for a moment—the butcher appraising beef on the hoof. Then he laughed and crushed the flower to his nostrils. "I am the Third Watcher!"

VARION hurled the blade with a snarl of disgust. He had recognized that mocking laughter. Besides, he had

caught a glimpse of white repulsive fangs and there swept into his mind a vision of strangely gnawed bones.

The undead one, sword in hand, dodged like a flash of light, almost contemptuously. But a sudden tremor of the room threw him aside, counteracting his step.

The blade found its mark and sank quivering to the hilt.

The creature lurched back, clawed at his throat, then collapsed in a writhing heap.

In a spasm of mingled horror and disgust, Varion fled behind the arras. There he found a small stairway that apparently wound to the very base of the tower. But it also coiled still higher, so he ascended it. The steps soon ended before a narrow arched portal that was covered with a thin film of dust and sealed with crimson wax. He examined this without difficulty, for the mighty winds had ceased with the death of the third watcher.

He paused a moment, half drugged with awe. Was it conceivable that beyond this door, locked fast in an enchanted sleep, the fabled Qais lay?

His hands trembled as he tugged at the latch. The seals cracked and the portal swung back on grating hinges. It disclosed a small chamber, furnished with golden hangings and lighted by windows set with thick topaz.

The archeologist gasped.

A young woman lay at full length on the narrow couch, her hands joined upon her bosom. All but her face was covered with a silken wrapping of intense whiteness. Her skin was like purest alabaster. A tint of coral was in her cheeks and her lips were the hue of pale marsh-roses. Her long hair twined flamelike about her shoulders and sparkled with saffron glints in the mellow glow of the windows.

The man who knelt beside her had long ago forgotten that all this was just part of his thesis for Branderbook and that if he but touched this ancient corpse it must crumble to dust.

"Qais—beloved!" he cried. "Awaken!"

He bent to kiss the pallid lips.

* * * * *

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF ARCHEOLOGY

To: Francis Varion, Candidate

From: Branderbook

Subject: Doctoral thesis, Chaldean Influences on the Architectural Style of a Tower of Ancient Sheba.

The Committee has tentatively accepted your thesis but there is a little background material which I think you may have ignored inadvisedly. The Librarian at Alexandria has kindly consented to review your paper and says he referred you to a few old Arabian Mss. dealing with the tower in question.

According to these documents an old sheik penned up his daughter in the tower and set some guardians to hold the young men at bay. These legends never have any factual basis, of course, but it always adds a little atmosphere to the paper to mention them in passing.

To digress a bit, most of you young Ph. D. aspirants have a dry barren style and have only the remotest conception of the romance behind these ancient structures. A footnote at the bottom of page 18 should cover the fable adequately.

(Signed) Branderbook.

P. S. Mrs. Branderbook is giving a cocktail party tomorrow evening for Graduate School newlyweds, at which time we shall expect to meet the exotic Mrs. V.

Read **THE SEED FROM SPACE**, a Brilliant Novel by Fletcher Pratt in May **STARTLING STORIES** — 25c Everywhere!

THE READER SPEAKS

(Continued from page 6)

the Mississippi, like a liquid comet's tail, 1,300,000 miles over the Gulf. Then he would write his story. The fact that in this particular case he might fail is beside the point. At least he has a chance.

Incidentally, if anyone among you *can* come up with a plausible theory for the above phenomenon, we would very much like to get a look at it.

To carry our conjectures further into the specific, let us take a look at the three lead stories in this issue and see if we can deduce where the author jumped out of the non-stif straitjacket into the speculative plausibility girdle. When you have read them you can look back here and check your opinions with ours.

In his short novel, *SON OF THE TREE*, Jack Vance has accepted star-travel throughout the Galaxy as a postulate—but this has, over the years, become so much a science fiction convention that it scarcely marks a jump-off point in a magazine devoted to the subject.

What Vance *has* done is to conceive of a world, credible in a galactic future, where the ancient Druid tree-worship is logically carried to a conclusion which fits the social, economic and spiritual status of its being. Such a conclusion, as postulated by the author, would not be possible upon Earth. Hence he has very cleverly created a planet where it is not only possible but the only credible culture.

Oddly enough, in the May *STARTLING STORIES*, Fletcher Pratt brilliantly tackled the same theme very much from a here-and-now basis with *THE SEED FROM SPACE*. Those of you who read it should have some fun comparing the two wholly different methods of approach. We found them both fascinating or we would not have published either story.

Three-Dimensional Polo

Again, in *TEMPORARY KEEPER*, Horace B. Fyfe, has assumed a conventional science fiction postulate—the existence of routine interplanetary life by and for humanity. But his jump-off point, it seems to us, lies in his speculation upon the problems of three-dimensional polo, played for a tremendous stake. The rest of the novelet merely builds up to and around this possibility, adding to its credibility and, we hope, to reader suspense.

In *I PSI*, our other novelet, Carter Sprague has dug into extra-sensory perception and telekinesis—neither one of which is held entirely beyond the bounds of reasonable hypothesis by enlightened folk today. But his deviation from, say, the card routines of Professor Rhine at Duke University, lies in an assumption that a

man should be able to make them work almost at will—and that a fraudulent machine could be so constructed that it had telekinetic powers under certain specialized conditions.

As you scan the short stories that accompany the above three, you might find it fun to locate the spot at which the author takes his leap from the accepted paths of reality and dives into the waters of speculation. You might even drop us a line about it if you think you have come up with the answers.

But Mark Twain really said it all when he stated—

There is something fascinating about science. One gets such wholesome returns of conjecture out of such a trifling investment of fact.

Furthermore it's fun.

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

APPARENTLY the new cover policy, inaugurated in the January, 1951, *STARTLING STORIES* and carried on equally in *TWS* is still meeting with approval. We will run straight space covers and girl-space covers from now on—with the insistence, in the case of the latter, that the girls be glamorous. Look for more straight space, however, in the July *SS* and August *TWS* covers.

AND WHY NOT EIGHT?

by John Gilson

Dear Editor: Seven and one-half cheers for the new type covers and type and style of the letter lineups in *TWS*.—Minneapolis, Minnesota.

LOVIN' GAL

by Betsy Curtis

Dear S. M.: Love those new *TWS* covers too!—201 Veteran's Village, Canton, New York.

All of which is balm to our Gilead. Thanks, John, Betsy and all the others who wrote in about the new decor. And now—

MUMMY'S UNMENTIONABLES

by John M. Weeks

Dear Editor: Apology of Safety Pins—attention Mr. Wallace West—In the Rhode Island School of Design Museum in Providence, there is a gold safety pin which came from a tomb in Egypt. Probably made about 3,000 B.C. Do you suppose Mr. Hunt (see *U.S. Patent* dated 1849) has a case against the maker of a safety pin

which help up a mummy's unmentionables for some 5,000 years?—Providence, Rhode Island.

Frankly we wouldn't know, John, but we're having our firm's attorneys look the matter up.

PAIR OF CRUTCHES

by Albert J. Lewis

Dear Editor: Tsk,—tsk, what you said!
...“whereas two hundred years ago cripples were deemed funny, we now say ‘as funny as a crutch’ to denote complete humorlessness.”

—L. Sprague de Camp
Of Worlds Beyond

“This is Sprague de Camp at his hilarious best—original, ingenious, swift and funny as a Vishnian crutch.”

—San Merwin, Jr.
Thrilling Wonder Stories, Feb., 1951

Or mayhap Vishnian crutches are different from other crutches, mayhap? Sincerely,

Albert J. Lewis
Ricketts House
California Institute of Technology
1301 California St.
Pasadena 4, Calif.

P.S. Congratulations on the cover—it's good!

Or, sharp as a tack—or, more people killed!
Ye Edde's bottle-scarred corpus lies second from the left.

MARKUP FOR BERGEY

by Joe Kinne

Dear Editor: Mark Bergey up there with the best of the cover artists! Keep up the standards set by this cover and you'll have the best looking mag on the market!

After looking (should I say leering?) at the illo on page nine, I have arrived at the conclusion that Orban has been taking lessons from Bergey (the old Bergey, that is).

I rate stories by percent. 70 isn't necessarily a bad rating. On the contrary, above 70 is a good rating.

“Overlords of Maxus” 80. A fast-moving interesting story but the ending was weak. I would class a story of 53 pages as a novelet, not a short novel.

“I The Un-mortal,” 92. Great! Deserves a sequel.

“Brother Worlds” 50. Nuff sed.

“Restricted Clientele” 80. Who is Crossen? A new-comer or a pseudonym?

“Just Push the Button” 40

The other shorts, N.C. (no comment).

I am collecting rejection slips. I have given you the honor of sending me my first slip. This story may not be so hot but Charles Catania and I are collaborating on a pip!

As I turn to the east and bow to the editor, Sam Schnickleheimer, my typewriter takes one look at him and all the keys fall off. So this will have to be the end.—255 South 6th Street, Fulton, New York.

The last name is Merwin, not Schnickleheimer—please! We are currently engaged in honing up our rejection slips, fondly awaiting

the arrival of your story. Still, you never can tell...

QUARTER-COURSE

by Jack M. Bickham

Dear Editor. Having recently completed a two-quarter course in Astro-Physics at Ohio State University, I hesitantly offer my understanding (?) of Einstein's postulations anent the speed-mass size-time relationship.

1. The speed of light is the only universal absolute, all else being relative to observational frame of reference

2. As the speed of light is approached by an object that object's mass becomes greater and its size becomes less

3. At the speed of light the size of an object becomes zero and its mass is infinity.

4. Space and time are the same—space-time. Time is only a measurement of space and vice versa.

5. Therefore—at the speed of light an object would be nowhere but everywhere would be in it. It would be nothing but everything would be in it. If it were everywhere there would be nowhere to go. It takes no time to go no place. Consequently all would be timeless.

6. At the speed of light-minus-one space could be traversed. Thus there would be time. At the exact speed of light all would be timeless. At the speed of light-plus-one, if we are to follow logical thought, it must be assumed that an object would get somewhere before it started. This, of course, is paradox but is also travel into the past (Eureka, a time machine!).

7. Our course instructor gave us these two statements to “explain” the whole thing—

a) If two objects are so situated in a space-time continuum that a third object may exist simultaneously to both without exceeding the speed of light the relationship is time-like.

b) If two objects are so situated in a space-time continuum that a third object must exceed or equal the speed of light in order to exist simultaneously to both the relationship is space-like.

Incidentally I offer this information in a spirit of helpfulness rather than exhibitionism. I prefer to believe that all our activities are aimed at happiness, which is the attainment of truth. This includes the reading of science fiction. Although my understanding of Einstein is practically non-existent it has opened new vistas to my imagination of truth. Perhaps something I have said will stimulate someone else. This may sound like idealistic drivel but I'm in that kind of mood.

As to reader James Lewis' suggestions on “inertia elimination”—man, I don't know. At the speed of light where can you go? You already don't exist but everything and everywhere are you

These are the sort of paradoxes that fascinate me. They show how limited we really are. Maybe that's why we read stf. Everything is so simple there.—767 Racine Avenue, Columbus 4, Ohio.

P.S. Those new space covers are magnificent. It's almost too good to last...

Don't worry about the covers, Jack. But you've got us worrying about some of your paradoxes. We can accept the Einsteinian postulates as you have outlined them above, all right, but we cannot help but wonder as to the

possibility of a macrocosm—a super-universe—of which our universe may be such a tiny component part as to make the meson look like a couple of Jupiters.

In such an instance, it seems to us, a whole new set of rules would have to apply—at least regarding our speed of light as the sole universal absolute. Not to mention a whole new set of paradoxes.

And incidentally we are with you as to the attainment of truth—though whether or not this implies happiness in our current soap opera-psychiatrist's couch version of same it is doubtful that either of us will ever know.

EARLY PHEASANT

by Bob Silverberg

Dear Sam: For some reason the local newsstand persists in distributing his copies of TWS three days before it hits the other stands. Thus I'm able to read the mag and send off my letter so that it'll reach you the day the mag officially is issued.

I wholeheartedly approve of both the new letter typeface and the new letter policy. I only hope this letter will be of sufficiently mature tone to rate publication.

Firstly, the cover—this painting indicates what a few fans (including myself) have been batting about for years—that Earle Bergey is indeed a master of texture and tones when not hogtied by publishing policy. The space-scene on the February cover is one of the finest your mag has run. It's definitely the best TWS cover since 1942. But do you remember the early Bergey covers of 1940 and 1941? Ahhh!

Then the stories. The novels lately have been fine. You, Mr. Merwin, are highly to be congratulated on your skillful development of Jack Vance from an author of formula potboilers to one of your topnotchers. This is his second top novel in recent months. I'd comment on the plot of the story but I'm afraid I can't—it was a tight beautifully-written story. Thanks. And thanks, also, for a policy of novels in each issue.

De Camp in the April issue is also great news—provided it's de Camp in his "Solomon's Stone" or "Land of Unreason" style, where he uses his immense erudition for humorous ends without having to stoop to burlesque and slapstick.

I was very surprised not to see stories by Mack Reynolds and Walt Sheldon in the current issue. These two boys are really ruining their talent by turning out an endless number of 5,000-word potboilers while they could be spending time on novelets which would bring out to a better extent their writing powers. Remember Fred Brown? His only ventures in science fiction up to 1948 were under 15,000 words. Then he took a little time and threw together a novel which has gone down as one of the all-time greats of **Startling Stories**—**WHAT MAD UNIVERSE**, of course.

Pardon me but at this point I'd like to insert a bit of immature chortling at a horrendous typo on page 91. There, in neat Campanile characters, were the words which are probably raising a batch of florid faces around TWS—"MILORDS METHUSELAH, A SPRAGUE novelet by CARTER." Now, you've labelled your stories "Astonishing," "Fantastic," "Interplanetary," "Thrilling," "Amazing," "Complete," "Novel of Space Adventure"—but never, never "Sprague." I can hardly wait to read this sprague novelet by Carter (Could this be

one-time amateur Wilm Carter—no, that's Carver. Maybe it's by Nick Carter).

"Just Push the Button" wasn't bad. I'd hesitate to call it tops, or even sprague, but it was readable.

THE FRYING PAN—Well, I'm glad you've shifted to good-natured fun, rather than the unintentional but nevertheless ruinous denunciation of past years. I've come to enjoy this humorous feature.

THE READER SPEAKS—The emphasis on maturity is welcome but apparently was misplaced on the latest issue, for you succeeded in editing out most of the former liveliness of the column—and your own replies were lacking in their usual humor.

Anyhoo, TWS is now at a high point it hasn't matched in years—after a prolonged slump in 1950 it's now at the peak of its career. The fine paper and clean covers help, y'know.—760 Montgomery Street, Brooklyn 13, New York.

In short, we're sprague, *n'est-ce pas*? We would joust with you anent one point in your otherwise delightfully flattering epistle, Bob—namely, your fulsome-ness is regard to our "development" skillful or otherwise of Jack Vance as a writer.

Son, we hate to disillusion you but what any editor can do for any writer is limited to a small amount of story criticism and/or a check for same. And we have had to give Vance very little criticism of recent years, constructive or otherwise. All we know is that the stories arrive—and we buy 'em.

So you'd better give the credit for Mr. Vance's improvement to—Mr. Vance. He rates it.

WE'LL BITE—WHEN?

by George Richardson

Dear Editor: When are you going to start printing science fiction and not suped-up adventure stories? With all your fine talk and avowed good intentions you are still printing the same kind of yarn that TWS featured ten years ago. Of a slightly higher literary quality, it's true, but without any basic difference. Take the current issue as a perfect example.

OVERLORDS OF MAXUS was little more than a rewrite of FIVE GOLD BANDS and indistinguishable in thought content from any number of s-f antiques. The emphasis is all on action with background detail and credibility inevitably suffering. Personally I think the whole story was fantastic, not because of the supergadgets and the planet-hopping but because of the economic and political setup and the oversimplification.

Authors—if you are not going to build more than the most superficial kind of background into your stories, then please place them on a planetary scale, where they will have at least some connection with present reality. Jack Vance—please turn out more stories with the careful craftsmanship of NEW BODIES FOR OLD, which I thought slightly sensational.

I, THE UN-MORTAL was just what you said it was and as such was not good science fiction. Neither did it have the smooth workmanship of Vance's yarn. Unfortunately, if you hadn't billed it that way, it is doubtful if anyone would have recognized it as being different from the majority of your stories. Both these stories reminded me of THE LEGION OF SPACE (1935) except that background is galactic instead of interplane-

tary. Just shows you how far we have progressed in fifteen years.

BROTHER WORLDS seemed to attempt to put some idea across. Unfortunately with me it was just an attempt. More space opera, but with more emphasis on character and less on action.

The shorts—Brown had a humorous bit of nothing, as intended. Good. Lee—I am getting sick and tired of this story and all variations. Love interest dragged in by the big toe. Ugh! Mines—Heinlein did this story nine years ago and much better too. Obvious. Crossen—someone tell Ken what a galaxy is and send him back to the MWA. Double plus ultra over simplification.

I guess I seem to be pretty much of a knocker but although I enjoyed most of the stories they could be so much better and they could be honest to goodness science fiction. You are not printing that—you are printing pseudo-scientific adventures and despite what you think there is a difference.

It is all right to decry the gadget type story and proclaim the necessity for real people in the stories, but you've gone overboard. You have substituted action for ideas. Your science is all implied and the sociology is fitted to the needs of an adventure yarn. Consistency and verisimilitude are abandoned and they are the life blood of the true science fiction story.

I could go on for hours, but I would probably be even more repetitious than I have been. However, one more plea—please get down to Earth. Some of the greatest science fiction of the past has been laid in that one location; GATHER, DARKNESS, SIXTH COLUMN, NERVES, etc.

I suppose you will get a lot of comment on the new cover theme, probably complimentary. However, I can't help but note that Bergey is not the man to do space scenes. It is presumed that you must use him, but it would be nice if he'd use just a little more care and perhaps study some of the work of Hubert Rogers who does them so well.

The Reader Speaks is fine and I, for one, like it long. I particularly like your fairly long and frequently frank answers but I still sort of wish we had a real science fictioneer and not someone brought up in the detective-story field as the man with the final say.

Despite the fact that this letter has been one long gripe I still buy your magazines and that's all that counts in the long run.—73 Hersey Street, Hingham, Massachusetts.

Well, we cannot help our bringing up—but we were never, never limited to detective stories in the past. And we have been absorbing stf hard and fast ever since being backed into this chair nigh onto seven years ago.

Actually, George, you do have a legitimate beef on our February issue. Here is how it happened. For some months, last summer and fall, we received for reasons still unknown to us very little usable material—and virtually all of that was space opera.

Well, we did the only thing possible—purchased sufficient material to keep from publishing blank issues, the while exhorting our authors to do just about what you seem to be wishing they would do. We also went out and rummaged around for fresh sources of supply, with Fletcher Pratt our outstanding catch to

date. Beginning with the March issue of SS and, we hope, continuing indefinitely, things look a lot better.

But in February, there were with two space opera staring us in the face—so we decided to run them together and have an orgy of orbits et cetera. Luckily not everyone feels as you do—but count us at least half on your side.

YOUR WELCOME

by Laura E. John

Dear Editor: I was very much surprised to see my letter heading The Reader Speaks. In fact, I was surprised to see it published. Thank you.

Enclosed is an orchid to you, the authors and the members of your staff for the superb issue of **Thrilling Wonder Stories** for February. I cannot truthfully say which of the novels was the best, as they were both very intriguing. And the short stories were the best I have read in a long time. This issue will be read until it is as limp as a dishrag. If all future issues are as completely good I'll have no more complaints.

Incidentally, since I wrote you last, we have read "Wine of the Dreamers" twice, "Shadows on the Sand" once and "New Bodies for Old" once. We are ready to start on John D. MacDonald's two classics again. By the way, would it be possible to obtain a new copy of "Wine of the Dreamers"? Ours is just about ready to give up the ghost.—Star City, Indiana.

Better help Mrs. John out, somebody. We liked her orchid even if it was in the form of a card. We only hope she was right about our February issue.

INCLINED TO AGREE

by Harry J. Entrican

Dear Editor: I've been reading science fiction of all kinds for a good number of years and I take it as it comes. I realize, being a writer, that there must be so much slush between every two good stories and once in a great while a masterpiece is written. So, I like your magazine.

I am inclined to agree with Laura E. John's letter in your February issue, as to the Reader's Column. I always read this column for the chance I'll find someone talking sense. It doesn't matter about what, just so long as it is sensible. I have a virulent dislike for any kind of jargon that mutilates plain good English. To my mind it is in the category of baby talk. When talking to babies it might possibly be acceptable but only then.

My primary reason for writing is to ask why, in your book reviews, you don't list more non-fiction in the fields related to Science Fiction. I refer to the pioneer work being done in psychology, biology, physics and so forth. For instance, cybernetics is a relatively new undertaking, and I, for one, would like to know where I might buy a book on the subject.

To descend to particular books; where can I purchase the following: All of the books of Charles Fort. Korzybski's **Science and Sanity**. C. K. Ogden and I. A. Nash's, **The Meaning of Meaning**?

I would be very much interested in seeing from time to time a list of books, their prices and publishers, in the non-fiction or semi-non-fiction category, in sub-

jects relating to Science Fiction.

I do not ask, like Laura, that I be printed but I would sincerely appreciate it if you could drop me a line telling me where I can get some or all of the books I've mentioned. I am especially interested in Charles Fort. I've heard about him for a number of years but no one seems to know who has his books.

For a number of years now I've been mulling over in my mind the idea of trying to break into science fiction but each tentative effort I make resolves into something pretty terrible and juvenile. Some one of these days I may get a surplus of adrenalin and manage to create one of those masterpieces I so much enjoy reading.

By the way I've just remembered another book I'd like to know where to buy if it exists. That is a non-fiction book by van Vogt. He wrote *The World of A.* (Non-Aristotelian).—Box #779, Marquette, Michigan.

We printed your letter because we have a hunch some of our energetic bookdealer friends in stf will be swamping you with the information you seek. However, Henry Holt & Co. of NYC published all five of the Fort books in one volume ten years ago, a volume which is, we believe, still available through dealers at any rate. It is called simply *The Books of Charles Fort* and reposes on a shelf within eight feet of our desk.

We forget who published *Science and Sanity* and know nothing of the Ogden-Nash job you mention. Candy's dandy, liquor's quicker and all that—or is that another Ogden Nash? And *Cybernetics* by Dr. Norbert Wiener is still the definitive job in that fascinating field. As for A. E. van Vogt, we know of no non-fiction books by him.

We hope you crash our fiction ranks soon, Harry, and are sorry not to review such non-fiction work as you desire. However, we only criticize volumes sent to us for that purpose by author, agent or publisher (we should give 'em the publicity otherwise!). At that we dealt with Roderick Seidenberg's *Post-Historic Man* and Frank Gaynor's *Pocket Encyclopedia of Atomic Energy* in our February review column. So if they want us to review them all they have to do is . . . But why make it easy for them?

MIGHTY FORTRESS FORT

by Bob Hoskins

Dear Editor: I just got the mag this afternoon and was very happy to see your Fortean editorial. You, Mr. Merwin, are a man after me own heart! I too have my own favorite piece of writing from the Fortean. I shall quote—even though you don't want me to. And I know you don't.

The following is from *The Book of the Damned*, page 21:

"One may have the knowledge of a Lavoisier, and still not be able to analyze, not be able even to see, except conformably with the hypnoses, or the conventional reactions against hypnoses, of one's era.

"We believe no more.

"We accept."

The foregoing has to do with Fort's discussion of meteors. It was one of the first parts of his complete works that I happened to read and it struck me as being particularly true. I have gained a few story ideas from his works that I am gonna use in my fan material. Pity the fan-ed's!

Pardon me if I seem somewhat elated at the moment. My mother just told me that a local woman by the name of Trube, a relative of Sprague de Camp, is gonna get me a first edition of one of his books. At the moment I dunno which one but it's sure to be good. I'm sorta hoping that it's "Lest Darkness Fall." This is one I've been wanting to read ever since I first heard of it.

It is my contention that we have time-travelers all about us at this moment. Only they are from several thousand different time tracks. Shall I name a few? Very well, I shall. Raymond Douglas Bradbury, Nelson S. Bond, Edmond Hamilton, Henry Kuttner (This boy is an accomplished traveler, having visited several hundred alternate possibilities), Wallace West, Sprague de Camp, Elron Hubbard and countless other men who pass themselves off as authors of stf. Of course, all stf authors aren't time travelers. There are always a certain number of imitators who take an idea and use a slightly different twist on it. And these are in the great majority.

I myself come from a time when Nelson Bond and Charles Fort are practically worshiped as demigods. That should explain to a few my own fondness for the works of the first-mentioned man—even to his poorer works as "Lancelot Biggs: Spaceman". At the present I consider myself extremely fortunate in possessing an autographed copy of his first book, "Mr. Mergenthwiker's Lobbies" and in having a cousin who personally knows the man.

In their list of future Popular Library reprints I sincerely hope your company is including Weinbaum's "The Black Flame" and "Dawn of Flame." Perhaps they may be persuaded to put out a few p-b anthologies including the cream of the crbp from as far back as the old Wonder mags, if that be necessary.

Again, how do you know an adult is reasonable? Just because someone once said man is a reasoning creature? But is he? I wish Charles Fort was here to deal with you. But since he isn't I'll have to try my best on my own.

Man is reasonable and a reasoning creature. Is he reasonable? I say no. Neither is he reasoning. He gets a bright (?) idea into his head and immediately goes scurrying about, searching for something to prove that he is right. When all of the time he is simply seeking something to prove to himself that he is high and mighty. Or at least fairly important. That is what I'm doing at this very moment. I admit it freely and without coercion on the part of anyone.

Someone once told him that he was made in God's image. Therefore he considers himself superior to any other kind of life. Is this reasonable? Look about you at the average person. Could you possibly conceive of a supreme being who would look like anyone around you? I can't. Least of all myself.

And I pride myself on the fact that I am fairly normal looking even though I do top two hundred with most of it fat. But I'm trying to trim this off. And I am apparently succeeding. My pants and belts are getting too big for me around the waist.—Lyons Falls, New York.

Bob, you have about the worst case of

stfanitis we have ever heard of. You remind me of the aristocratic ladies of pre-revolutionary Russia who used to scrounge Rasputin's discarded underwear from his laundry and wear it without change for months on end. No fooling, it's a matter of record. Better fix a reasoning eye on some of your idols. Not all of them even have feet—much less feet of clay.

KENTUCKY AVENUE CORN

by Mrs. Nan Redcorn

Dear Editor: I have not written to you before but **Startling** and **Thrilling Wonder** have improved so much in the last year that I had to write and tell you how much I enjoyed them. I have even liked some of the covers and that is an improvement. I think the cover on the Feb. '51 is one of the best you have ever had—please have lots more like it.

The stories in this issue were mostly good. I didn't think the novel was quite as good as usual but I liked it well enough. I liked **THE UN-MORTAL** better than the **OVERLORDS OF MAXUS** so I will put it first, **OVERLORDS** next and **BROTHER WORLDS** third. The short stories I would put all together in fourth place. They were all well written and well planned.

I have never seen any letters from fans in Tenn. in your magazine. Is this discrimination or doesn't anyone else read stf in Tenn.? I would like to get in touch with fans in Knoxville and vicinity—maybe start a fan club.

I have some back issues for sale dating from '42 of all the magazines then in print. If anyone is interested they can write me for list and price.

That is about all for this time. Keep up the good work and you will probably be hearing from me again. —127 Kentucky Ave., So. Clinton, Tenn

No, Mrs. Redcorn, it is not discrimination. We just haven't had anyone writing in from your neck of the proverbial woods in recent years. Perhaps your epistle will get things under way down there. We hope so.

DOWN WITH ADULTS!

by Marion Zimmer Bradley

Dear Editor: I view with alarm this trend in recent science fiction toward a more "mature" and "adult" viewpoint.

Science fiction and fantasy are escapist literature. They were always considered so and while they were regarded as good healthy escapism they remained the best possible means of letting off steam. Now, however, the trend seems to be swinging toward a serious and adult type which actually is to be taken seriously as having a certain social significance in the world of today.

We live in a tense world—a world keyed to fever pitch, a world which is nearly at the breaking point. What good does it do our overfevered minds to "escape" by reading a serious-socially-significant science-fiction story about a world which may be blown to bits by the bomb any moment—like the one we live in?

Science fiction fandom has been recruited before this from the escapist, the person who finds life too dull, the invalid boy who is unable to go out and work off his adventure-lust in a football game, the girl (like

myself) who was laid up with arthritis and unable to dance and have fun—or the normal person who got tired of the tense world-weary writings of the Hemingways and the Steinbecks and other doleful prophets.

Now, however, we must consider with our mature adult minds **even** the science fiction we read.

I think science fiction has a mission in today's world—but I don't think that mission is to trap us into sober thinking about the future. I think the mission of science fiction and fantasy is just the same as it ever was—to let us **get away** from serious adult thinking for a little while and rest of our minds—so we can plunge into adult thinking again with renewed vigor from our little rest cure on Mars.

If science fiction turns all serious and sociologically-minded—WHERE are we going to turn for escape reading? Some "constructively-minded" fans may take me up on this—but people DO need escape reading. There are enough serious magazines now. Let's have a little fun. After all, if the serious-minded readers object to the "juvenile escapist trash" no one is compelling them to read pulp magazines at all. They can read anything from the **DAILY WORKER** to the **JOURNAL OF EXPERIMENTAL POETRY**. But why do they flood into a magazine which is supposedly for entertainment and gum it all up with their naive "deep thoughts?"

I'm not condemning the good stories you publish or advocating (God forbid) a return to Captain Future exclusively. But there is a stopping place in the trend toward "serious mature thought." I think you've reached it—Box #431, Tahoka, Texas.

Amen, selah and all that! Just one wee observation, Marion—since when was Steinbeck doleful? Did you ever read *Tortilla Flat* or *Cannery Row*—and did you miss the raucous low-comedy sequences of *Grapes of Wrath*? Or, come to think of it, read anything more escapist than the *Sierra Madre* thing? Fie upon thee, and cease thy zimmering.

—Did we say *one* and *wee*? Please forget both. If Hemingway isn't escapist literature we wouldn't know what is—certainly his work has small relation to any realities we have ever faced or heard of. But the bulk of it is ever so entertaining, obscenity, obscenity.

And furthermore it has long been our fond belief that no one in Texas has cause to worry about the A-bomb or whatever supersedes same—unless through fear that the Lone Star State might miss out on the biggest blast of all time. Worrying will get you nowhere—not even worrying about whither science fiction. Confidentially, if we were you we wouldn't. We like a full dram of escapism ourselves now and again.

PONDEROUS PAUSE

by Joe Gibson

Dear Ed.: The February TWS cover was beautiful. This was an interplanetary Bergey the way it should be. McDowell's **I, THE UN-MORTAL** was good too—the best yarn this month. As a graybeard fan who read a wide-eyed Weinbaum from the concealment of high-school texts during study periods (a practice which is probably still in vogue among the younger set) I found McDowell's yarn a chuckling satire on the old tudent-and-blunder space opera. Well-conceived, well-executed.

One of the most titillating experiences I've had re-

cently was comparing recent TWS-SS mags to those of some ten to fifteen years ago. The comparison made the earlier issues seem hilarious, a fact most pleasing to myself but which doesn't bode well for your reprint editions. Plans of another publisher to put out a stf slick hit a considerable snag, recently—something happened in Korea—but while fellows like you, Lem, haven't noticeably improved the quality of the paper in your mags, you've certainly done something about the quality of what's printed thereon.

It gives me pause to ponder. Present indications, as far as I've been able to follow them, seem to show that science-fiction isn't booming. Not like the historical romance novels. It's growing gradually, winning new readers constantly but at no phenomenal rate. This gradual growth could mean a lingering sort of popularity in coming years.

But it'll be a popularity based on the likes and desires of the majority of readers—and that majority may well include more new readers of stf than old! Their tastes may differ from those of us who've followed the field for years. It was probably their tastes which put Hubbard's and Scully's books on the best-seller list!

The results could prove surprising. Promags we like may become lesser members of the field. Promags we don't like may sell the most copies. I have a faint suspicion that greater popularity could be achieved—and more money made—by stf if we had a few Earle Stanley Gardners in the field!

This brings up the matter of being "adult"—everywhere I hear fans, authors and editors talking about how "adult" science-fiction is becoming. Seems we once were swinging from the chandelier with juvenile shrieks of merriment. A reaction from those earlier times, someone hastily adds. Reading stf "trash" was then somewhat like being a nudist. We have "come of age," everyone says happily.

But it seems to me that science-fiction is still fun—we're still swinging from the chandelier—and the only thing missing is that juvenile shrieking. Someone drowned him probably. Our growing popularity can be simply attested to the fact that the public has finally become aware of us swinging up here and—for various reasons—has a certain yen to join us.

In short, we mustn't forget to keep having fun. It's probably the most appealing quality we have. The line should be drawn on being "adult" at precisely this point. And I'm afraid it's a rather hard point to define. —24 Kensington Ave., Jersey City 4, N. J.

Well anyway, Joe, you sound a lot better than Mrs. Bradley in the previous letter. Right—we agree. Let's be as mature as all get out—as long as we have fun. Frankly we have had a lot more since we left adolescence far behind us. It's about time we let the kids into the act, *nick wahr?* Set up a chandelier in the other alley!

BUTENHOF POLL

by Ed Butenhof

Dear Editor: I have just finished the February issue of TWS and a very good issue it is too. Number one story was OVERLORDS OF MAXUS, much better than

THE FIVE GOLD BANDS. Second was I, THE UNMORTAL and behind it, was BROTHER WORLDS. As usual the shorts were not very good—the best being RESTRICTED CLIENTEL.

I am very glad to see your change in cover policy. It really improves the magazine.

In case you're interested there follows my lists of the ten best stories to appear in your magazines this past year:

STARTLING

- 1 Wine of The Dreamers
- 2 The Cybernetic Brains
- 3 The Shadow Men
- 4 The City At Worlds End
- 5 The Lady Is A Witch
- 6 Purpose
- 7 The Five Cold Bands
- 8 Pardon My Iron Nerves
- 9 The Black Ewe
- 10 Encroachment

THRILLING WONDER

1. Sunday Is 3,000 Years Away
2. When Time Went Mad
3. New Bodies For Old
4. Planet of The Small Men
5. Citadel of Lost Ages
6. Shadow On the Sand
7. Dancing Girl of Ganymede
8. The New Reality
9. First Person Singular
10. The Everlasting Food

The two best stories in STARTLING also placed one, two in the stf field for 1950. The Best in TWS placed 15th in my all stf ratings while THE SHADOW MEN placed 18th and WHEN TIME WENT MAD placed 20th. NEW BODIES FOR OLD, THE CITY AT WORLD'S END and PLANET OF THE SMALL MEN also placed on the 1st thirty—172 East Vista Ave., Daly City, 25, California.

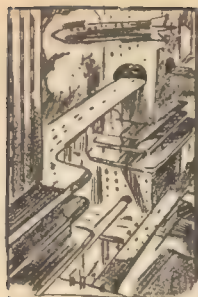
Didn't know there *were* any other magazines in the stf field, Ed. But thanks for awakening us to the fact. And thanks for your listings. Outside of a tendency to overrate long stories merely because they are long and to underrate shorter tales for the reverse reason, you haven't picked too badly.

Why is it so many folks consider a long tale superior merely because it is longer? Must have something to do with that "bigness" delusion philosophers are always decrying in Americans. Certainly, no matter how you slice it, it stubbornly refuses to fit facts.

And that is that—a nice crisp letter column on the whole. And once again, where are the poets? We await their reappearance, with razor-sharp dactyl and trochee. Until August, then, and good luck.

—THE EDITOR.

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SCIENCE FICTION FORECAST for the NEXT ISSUE



IT IS our considered opinion that Raymond F. Jones manages to convey in his stories more of a sense of *immediacy* than any other science fiction author. Be his stories set in past, present or future, let them deal with alien commerce, with time-travel or with cybernetics—they all have in common the rare quality of transferring their readers into the very heart of the situations and people they develop.

In **ALARM REACTION**, the short novel which will open our August edition, Mr. Jones has achieved immediacy in greater measure than ever before. As to theme, **ALARM REACTION** is based upon the emergency landing of a space-ship far superior to our own in our most important Pacific base—the time being somewhere in the foreseeable future. And the landing itself presents some soul-searing problems in science and ethics to the officers in charge.

But more than this it lays bare for us the lesser tensions—between man and wife, between officer and high brass, between scruple and expediency, between human and alien—that become inescapably part of the fabric of the larger theme. It is these tensions that make the story real, the problem imminent and the suspense wearing. We believe that **ALARM REACTION** is destined to take its place among the top stories of 1951.

Our second short novel is **EARTHLIGHT** by Arthur C. Clarke. This is, as the title should reveal to the discerning, a story of life on the Moon. It tells us of a Moon still valuable for its mineral deposits in an era when man has

long since reached the outer planets.

It is a story of life in the Lunar Observatory at a time when the inhabitants of the outer planets and asteroids are ripe to revolt against the leadership of Mother Earth and when the containing of such a revolt is a crucial factor in the maintenance of civilization throughout the Solar System.

You will get to know and understand Wheeler and Jamieson, whose curiosity involves them in the greater game being played beyond the shell of the observatory, the leader of the mysterious immigrants to the secret base beyond Mt. Tico and the far shore of the so-called Sea of Rains.

Ultimately, as the climax approaches inexorably, you will meet Fletcher, the high emissary from Earth and have a stage box as the interplay of cosmic forces roars into unparalleled violence. The Moon in **EARTHLIGHT** is a very exciting place on which to be.

Our novelet for August will be **ULTIMATE PURPOSE**, a collaboration by Walter Kubiilus and Fletcher Pratt, which gives us a vivid idea of what can happen to an Utopian world when the machine behind the machines decides that Utopia has gone far enough. A stirring and thought-provoking story.

Also present, as always, will be a selection of the best short stories at hand, most of them by authors tested and proven in the field of science fiction. The second of James Blish's articles about our Solar System will be on hand as will your editor with his rocketload of features and departments. It may well prove to be a memorable issue.

—THE EDITOR.

The FRYING PAN



A Commentary on Fandom

ON THE professional author or editor who comes face to face with science fiction fandom for the first time, the impact is nothing less than amazing, not to say astounding, galactic or even just plain startling. If he be author he finds intense shaggy kids walking 'round and 'round him like dogs around a hydrant, the while they mumble questions based on inner meanings he never knew his stories to have.

If he be editor he may find himself, once the initial shyness has worn off, fighting for his personal as well as his professional life. He is assailed from all sides by folk who hate Bradbury or Doc Smith or Henry Kuttner or his own latest hasty editorial or Murray Leinster or untrimmed edges or John D. MacDonald or Raymond F. Jones or George O. Smith or his cover artist or A. E. van Vogt or Jack Vance or John D. MacDonald or his interior illustrations or . . . the list is as endless as the roll of science fiction authors, editors, magazines and all their sundry features.

Furthermore, while fanopinions are invariably sharp-edged and definite, they are frequently rooted in misinformation that leaves the editor gasping—such as that memorable moment in 1947

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when we were answering questions on the podium at the Philadelphia Convention (Philcon, to you) and some squeaky voice from a middle row said, "When are you going to revive *Unknown*?"

Since *Unknown Worlds* was formerly put out by a rival publishing house and since its editor, Mr. John W. Campbell, Jr., was among those present, all we could do was stand there, stunned, until the laughter died and go into a "Next question, please?" routine. When we met Mr. Campbell outside upon making our escape he was muttering dire things about fans not knowing which way was up and the like.

A couple of years later we were more or less minding our business in the office, weeding out duds from the letter column of this magazine, when it was announced that the editor of a fan magazine wished to interview us for his publication. Assembling all our best answers we donned coat and mustache and went out to the foyer, prepared to reply to anything.

But the earnest young man, complete with pencil and paper, who there awaited us seemed to have other ideas in mind. We sat and he sat and nothing happened. Not a question passed the braces on his teeth. So finally, in desperation, we began asking him a question or two about his own magazine.

This opened the floodgates and we were so busy asking him questions for the next half hour that we utterly forgot to answer any. And, come to think of it, he never asked us any. Yet, in his next issue, there was the "interview"—full of facts that were news to us.

The payoff on this chap is that shortly thereafter, when we happened to be tuned in to Bill Leonard's *This Is New York* radio program, Mr. Leonard described to his audience an interview with the same fan editor—and with exactly the same results. He was able to tell his radio listeners a lot about fandom but he too had not been questioned himself.

You don't suppose the young man is trying to start a trend?

Then there were a couple of young fans, feminine gender, who, although we had barely grazed them in passing at some convention or other, used to drop in on us and describe in minute detail their health, their love and/or marital woes and how about a job? Invariably concluding with a hastily-thought-up regards to our wife—as if we had sought the rendezvous (if such it could be called under the stern eyes of the office receptionist and various cartoonists, paper salesmen and dejected authors waiting for rejected stories) and had thereby laid ourselves open to blackmail which they were graciously not insisting on collecting.

We have come, over the years, to rate ourselves a pretty good judge of regional character—for fans drop in from all over (or under or wherever in gehenna they do come from) and they have been dropping in now for quite some time and in quite some numbers.

This rare talent was put to the test when a gorgeous and gigantic blond young married couple turned up some months back. The husband, who spoke with a soft drawling accent, announced that he was writing his thesis on science fiction for a degree from the University of New Mexico and had a few questions to ask us before returning to the Great Southwest.

Quite intelligent questions too—and while we answered them with what we hoped was matching intelligence we could not help marveling at the type of young superfolk the healthy outdoor life of the region was developing. No kidding, they were wonderful, both over six feet tall, well proportioned and with that healthy sun-bronzed look of cleanliness associated with California tennis players and Grade-A Western movies.

Before they departed we asked them if it were their first trip to New York and the Northeast—to be greeted with the news that *he* was a native of Marthas Vinyard while *she* was born and bred in Vermont. We slunk back to our sanc-

tum, too demoralized even to fend off passing spitballs from the mailing room boys.

No, we have come to realize that fans are a phenomenon that cannot be figured either by appearance or in advance. And don't get us wrong—we love 'em!

—THE EDITOR.

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK REVIEW

THE WOLF LEADER by Alexandre Dumas, translated by L. Sprague de Camp. Prime Press, Philadelphia (\$3.00).

An extraordinarily fine example of fantasy printing at its best, embellished with near-brilliant illustrations by Mahlon Blaine, this known volume by the author of *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* does not emerge as an unqualified success. And this despite a translation by Mr. de Camp that is not only scholarly but, as was to be expected, rescribed into velvet-smooth English.

It is our hunch that the flaw in this otherwise fine piece of amber lies in the story itself. Certainly it is one of the great French novelist's less fortunate efforts. It is a symbolic tale whose chief purpose aims to reveal the innate inability of the average mortal sinner to employ the gift of satanic powers to any real advantage for himself or anyone else.

In this instance the average mortal is a French forest sabot maker of the late seventeenth-early eighteenth century period and the donor of magic power is the leader of a pack of werewolves who befriends him. His sin, of course, is an overweening ambition to be more than a match for the local duke, in power, in prestige and in prowess with the more attractive ladies of the vicinity.

The combination is attractive enough intrinsically but while Thibault and his frustrations prove absorbing throughout the first half of the volume they begin to bore through repetition long before the reader attains the final pages. As a bit of fantastic curiosa this is a

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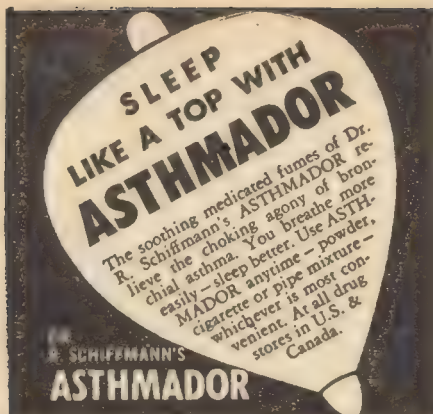
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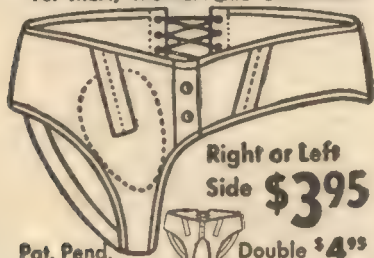
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good bet—otherwise it is only for the most devoted of Dumas-pere addicts.

GALACTIC PATROL by Edward E. Smith, Ph. D., Fantasy Press, Reading, Pennsylvania (\$3.00).

Well, intergalactic rocketships are back on the scene once more—and once again it is Kinnison versus nasty old Boskonian. And once again Kinnison loses the enamel of his incisors before emerging triumphant, this despite the full-hearted aid of all his lens-bearing friends, to say nothing of the lens-making and ever-loving Arisians.

Spoofing aside, this is a grand buckety-buck example of the primitive space opera genre in which planets are treated as small housing lots, solar systems as rural townships and galaxies as neighboring cities. No sex, no people to speak of—just villains, gadgets and heroes. If you go for this sort of thing, jump in.

A HANDBOOK OF SPACE FLIGHT by Wayne Proell and Norman J. Bowman, Ph. D., Perastadion Press, Chicago.

The long-time editor of the *Journal of Space Flight* and the editor of *Rocket Abstracts* have put together a fact-packed little volume whose information is mostly in tabular form and includes under ninety-four sub-heads such abstrusities as Percent of Normally Incident Light Reflected by Transparent Media of Various Refractive Index, Melting Point of Ceramic Constituents and Calculated Data on the Atmosphere Above the F2 Layer at Latitude 45°. About all we can say is, "Whew!"

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(Concluded from page 103)

there *plus* your good advice. Too bad they limit smoking."

Dawn winked at the word "advice."
"Thanks—Doc—for everything."

Spinner grinned and moved on.
"That's a cute shiner you're getting," he told Anne, breaking free at last.

"Isn't it awful?" she agreed.

"You might step along to his office, my dear," her father suggested blandly.
"Perhaps the young man has some remedy."

Spinner darted a look at him but the elder Gibbs had already turned to assist Jones in holding back the passengers. He took Anne's arm and led her into the passageway.

At the far end he saw Reilly peering out the open door of the control room and returned the pilot's wave. "You know," he began, "I think I ought to tell you—"

"That you aren't a psychiatrist? I already heard about it from Dawn while we were holding our breaths."

"Oh? What did your father say?"

"He thought it was 'harumph—quite original!' Just the same, even knowing how you could handle a jet, I was scared to death."

"Really emotionally disturbed?" asked Spinner, pausing with his hand on the door to his office.

"Utterly!" affirmed Anne, smiling despite the stiffening bruise under her eye.

"Well now," said Spinner in his best professional tone, "that's just exactly what I'm here for, miss. Step inside, please, and tell me *all* your worries!"

He threw open the door. "In fact," he added, "I doubt I'll have time to listen to any others the rest of the trip."

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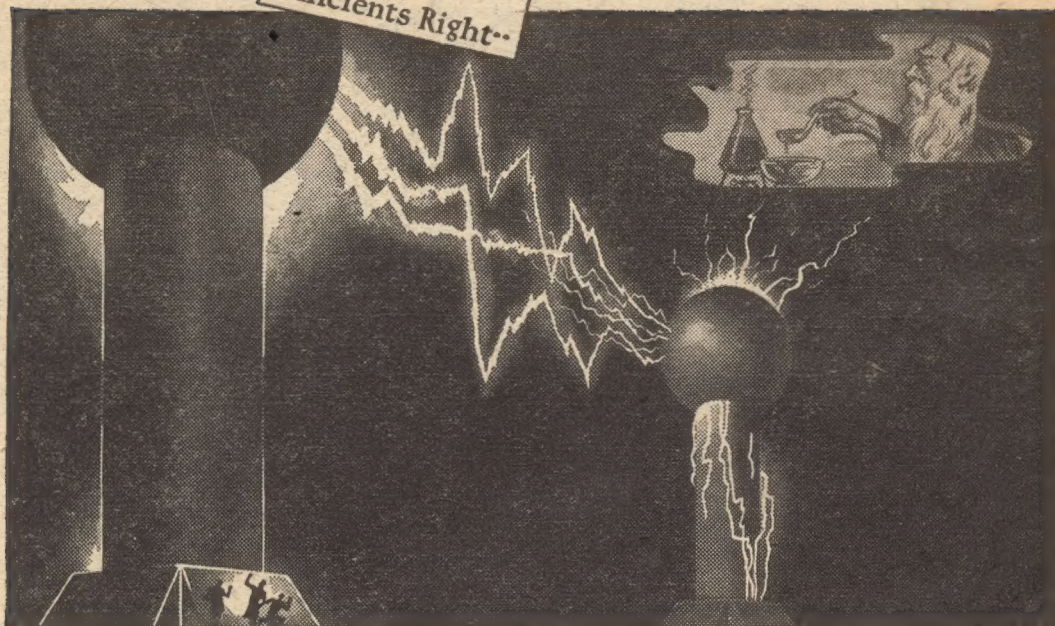
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